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ACTION FOR MEN • DARING STORIES



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Foreign Legion
Meets

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ACTION FOR MEN • TELLING STORIES

Abstract

INTRODUCTION	4
MONSIEUR MURDER (novelet) Theodore Roscoe	6
THUNDER DECK R. V. Gery	30
BAYOU TRAP Hapsburg Liebe	44
THE BLACK PEARL (Illustrated on cover) .. Paul Annixter	49
SPURS IN THE DUST George Rosenberg	66
FIGHTER'S SOCKS Walter Hopper Martin	78
THE LOOSE-LEAD DOG Philip Cole	82
THE ATOLL OF FLAMING MEN (novelet) Ralph R. Perry	98
READER'S PREFERENCE PAGE (double-barrelled)	129 / 130

Richard A. W. Loveland, Editor

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Introduction

HERE IS THE first issue of *WORLD-WIDE ADVENTURE*, offering you action stories of every variety, from all times and places the world over. The six continents and the seven seas are our province, as well as the skies above them. We cannot promise to cover the entire globe in space or time in each issue, but we do promise to keep you moving around as you read, to take you away from the commonplace, the here-and-now.

You have read tales of the French Foreign Legion before, of course; but did you ever read one wherein the Legionnaires were not fighting Arabs or other Africans in the desert? Well . . . this one is different; come with us to—of all places!—the Alps, in 1918. Here you will find that those hard-bitten sinners, who thought that this would be a lark, have to change their minds as they encounter—*Monsieur Murder*!

You've sailed the seas, in Imagination, with Captain Bligh, and the unfortunate Captain Quong, of course; so mutiny on the high seas is not entirely unknown to you. And on a beaten-up old wreck like the *Blackstone*, as she was circa 1910, a mutiny could be considered almost a routine affair. But there was a stowaway on this trip out from Havana, and the mutineers and officers alike had a surprise in store for them when the strange passenger ascended the *Thunder Deck*.

Some places aren't much different now than they were in your grandfather's time, and one of these is the bayous of our Southern states. Very picturesque from a safe distance. But people live there, as they always have, and some of the inhabitants are very attractive young girls—who, as anywhere else, can motivate a jealous suitor to construct an ingenious Bayou Trap.

To those of us who were brought up on Kipling's stories, India isn't what it used to be. We can admire the industrial progress that is taking place under great difficulties—but what will be the price? Will what was good in the days of British occupation be driven out along with the evils of even benevolent colonialism, and the communion between man and beast (particularly, the lordly elephant) be forgotten—so that in days to come there would be none who could speak the language of *The Black Pearl*?

The Old West lives on TV screens, of course, but the power of the written word has not entirely been banished by electronics. Many are the areas of our Western states where even today a man without special knowledge of the land could not survive long were he deprived of a horse, and had to drag his *Spurs in the Dust*.

Lumber camps are good places to go in order to get into "condition"—if you can take it. And it's a good place for a boxer with "glass hands"

(the kind that break easily when he lands a solid one on his opponent's jaw) to build himself up. But he has to avoid fighting, even though he may be able to overcome bigger men with ease, due to his ring training. That was the case with Kid Berretti, who was being needled and hulled into throwing some of his *Fighter's Socks*.

The men who swarmed up to the Klondike to dig gold, like those who filled California in 1849 and thereafter, weren't there all on their lonesome. Soon little towns sprang up, offering the needed services of civilization, as well as some not so desperately needed—namely, the opportunity to lose your dust much more quickly than you made it. And dog-sled racing brought forth fantastic wagers in those days. It followed that somewhat unsportsmanlike methods of insuring a win were not unknown—which is what happened to Alec Roberts, when his lead dog was shot the day before the race on which his best friend's entire fortune was staked. It looked as if Alec had lost the race before it could start—then he remembered the particular use of *The Loose-Lead Dog*.

Ever hear of pirates operating in the South Seas without a ship? Neither had Bill Williams, until he came upon a derelict lugger, not far from the atoll called Runaloro,—a derelict full of dead men, but with no clues as to who had killed them or how, in the instance of several who showed no marks of violence whatever. Bill should have let it alone, should have taken the lugger to the nearest authorities, but he was the kind who had to go and work a puzzle out for himself. And that was how he came to *The Atoll of Flaming Men*.

Now—when you've read the stories in this issue, we'd like to hear how you felt about them. That's why we have the Reader's Preference Page in the back; it's there for your votes and comments if you'd like to fill it in, cut it out, and send it to us. But we don't insist that you use this page—a postcard or letter will do just as well. Any comment from you will be of help to us, so long as you let us know how you felt about a story or stories (naturally we'd love to see you rate them all!), favorably or unfavorably. And for the sake of those who take the trouble to vote, we'll try to let you know in a later issue how the consensus of the active readers (those who let us know) compared with yours.

We honestly feel we're giving you a good magazine, but no matter how right we might be, there is always room for improvement; and while it is not always possible for an editor to do everything a reader urges, it still often happens that a reader will suggest something entirely possible—and also a very good idea. So let's hear your ideas on how we can make *WORLD-WIDE ADVENTURE* better! RAWL



MONSIEUR MURDER

by THEODORE ROSCOE

TIME: 1918

PLACE: The Alps



It started when the gods behind the line decided to transfer a company of Legionnaires from the hell-pots on the Morne and let them do some fighting in the Alps. The Legionnaires thought they'd have a ball—they hadn't heard of Monsieur Murder!

Old Thibaut Corday, veteran soldier of the Legion, was a crack rifle shot for all his whiskers and rheumatism; and Harper, the young consulate attache who had spent a day hunting mountain goat with the old soldier, confessed he had never seen such shooting.

"Are you wonderful with a gun!" he admired. "Whew! Not a bullet wasted all afternoon. What a thorn you must have been in the enemy's side, Corday. Now I know how you earned that sharpshooter's medal of yours."

The old man waved a leathered

hand. "They had me down as a sniper in the war, but I was not much of a shot when you consider it." His blue eyes twinkled like sharp little stones. "Compared to some marksmen I know, I was the amateur. There was a sniper in our company of Legion dogs, an American by the name of Sandhurst. Elihu Sandhurst. There was a sharpshooter! Not a thorn in the enemy's side, but a bullet.

"He was one of those spare, rock-ribbed New Englanders, brought up on toil and proverbs, with eyes like an eagle and a sero-oose and something about him that made you think of winter. That Yankee had a genius for shooting, and I do not believe he had seen a rifle before the war. When Europe blew up he rushed to France and joined the Foreign Legion—straight out of a Boston law school. In three weeks the war had made of him something quite different than a student of law books. The best shot in the Allied armies. *Oui!* That is genius. And—but for one other marksman—that Yankee was the best sharpshooter in all the war."

"I'll bet that other sharpshooter was you," Harper chuckled.

"It was not!" Old Thihaut Corday shook his head with emphasis. "That other sharpshooter was just the finest marksman to the world, I tell you. I am not a bad shot and that genius,

Sandhurst, was a marvel; but we were children with popguns against that other one. *Sapristi!* we were. And what was worse, that champion, deadeye sniper was on the *enemy* side—an Austrian!"

"Tell us about him!" Harper cried. "Who was he?"

Old Thihaut Corday grinned in his copper beard (later we were to remember that grin) and drew up his chair. "It is a wild story," he declared, loading his black pipe and gazing off into the veranda shadows with the grin fading on his lips and a little furrow of memory sobering his forehead. "In some ways a most terrible story, as it came within a millimeter of finishing the lot of us.

"I was just the spectator to the thing, but I felt that enemy sniper's bullets moan past my ear a few times and came close to being the innocent bystander. That Yankee fire-eater, Sandhurst, took it worse than that, and as for our *enemy*—sacred stove! When I remember that deadly battle in the Alps it curls the little hairs on my neck, and when I think of that incredible, moon-mad ending in that flower garden valley high up in Austria, Death stalking Death, a quitoine dose of hate on one hand and on the other hand a—*Sacre Nom de Dieu!* A fight between sharpshooters! And what sharpshooters! I tell you oow, it was the strangest

conflict of all the war, and see if you do not agree."

THE AFFAIR STARTED (old Thihaut Corday began) when the gods behind the line decided to transfer a company of Legionnaires from the hell-pots on the Marne and let them do some fighting in the Alps. That was early in 1918. Italy had been catching the devil from Austria, and we were rushed to assist her and a regiment of French *Chasseurs* up in a mountain pass along the Austrian border.

It was a new experience for the French Foreign Legion and we were happy to see new country with visions of Italian wine and pretty girls in Alpine hats. As for the Austrians—a fig! What were Austrians to Legionnaires who had battled Touareg on the Sahara and fought the ace troops of Prussia for three years? We would give the Austrians hell.

That was what Elihu Sandhurst, the Yankee, said. I wish you could have heard the way he spat out "Austrians", as if he was ridding his mouth of castor beans. I told you he had studied Law in Boston, and he knew his Blue Books and Red Books and codes of International Agreements. And to Sandhurst's mind the Austrians were responsible for the war. They had attacked Serbia and shelled noncombatants in Belgrade and

introduced gas and fired dum-dum bullets and been first to use *Einschusspatronen*—those cursed little explosive bullets that hurt when they enter a man's body.

After a lifetime of soldiering I was confident that war was no game one could play with rules and codes of honor. Sacred pig! A professional soldier learns that soon enough. What difference does it make if you kill a man with an outlawed gas shell or a regulation needle bayonet? All this humbug about limiting the size of the bullet that flies to slay an enemy makes me sick at the stomach. Murder is murder, *c'est en!*

But Sandhurst was the rock-ribbed New England Puritan, spare as a pine tree and with convictions. He came over bravely from America to help France, and he had not been with the Foreign Legion three months before he was marksman and pride of the regiment.

So our Legion dogs tramped into the Alps. I did not know where or what part; we had traveled in freight cars at night and slept all day and sometime or other had crossed part of Italy into strange mountains. One evening we marched up a mountain road and relieved a hatch of *Chasseurs Alpins* in a trench. This trench was on the side of a steep cliff and below us was a broad valley. There was a river flowing down

this valley like a channel of laundry suds, swift and deep in the April rain. Across the river on the opposite mountainside was another little trench. There were the Austrian defenders.

It seemed to me the good *Chasseurs* were mighty glad to leave the place to us, but I could not comprehend why. All we had to do was sit in our high ditch and watch that far-away trench of Austrians. We could not charge because the river was flooded, and it promised not to dry up until summer. It was nice up there in the mountain air with the valley fresh as a new cabbage, a holiday after the Marne. And the Austrians across the valley looked harmless as sparrows in a distant nest. Ha ha! That was where we were fooled.

"You mean to say we must sit here and wait for that river to dry before we can attack?" Sandhurst the Yankee shouted, as we marched into our trench. "We've got to wait in this hole and . . .

Poug!

A tiny shot had echoed on that far-away Austrian slope. Sandhurst's kept flew from his head. He threw himself against the sandbags and the rest of us dropped. Sandhurst picked his cap out of a puddle and there was a hole drilled smack through the crown. That bullet had parted his hair, too, and remember it was raining and

those Austrians were a quarter mile away. *Sac a papier!* A *Chasseurs* liaison officer came running to yell at us.

"Keep the head down, you sacred fools. That is a sharpshooter over there who will teach you something. He has been there all winter and for months we have tried to bring him down. God knows how many *Chasseurs* he has killed, and you *Legionnaires* will learn to regret that villain. The most dangerous man in the Austrian army, he is, and we call him Monsieur Murder!"

Sandhurst laughed through his teeth. The enemy had handed him a calling card and he didn't like such a greeting. "Monsieur Murder, is he? You leave him to me. That one's mine!"

HE WAS UP bright and early next day in his own private niche in the sandbags, rifle loaded and peeking out, eye pasted to the sights, finger itching on trigger. That is how I remember Sandhurst best, leaning there tight served and grim in the jaws, his kept pushed back on his curly dark head, his eye blue as a point of ice levelled down the barrel of his Lebel. He was to hold that stern and deadly pose for a long time.

My own post was not far from his; I, too, was supposed to stand by and pick off enough game to earn sniper's pay. Can you see

us up there in that mountain crevice trapshooting at midgets in a similar crevice a quarter mile away across a valley? *Out*, and that first day Sandhurst scored two and I scored one, but our enemy scored five. Imagine our feelings when we learned that the enemy's five had all been chalked up by the same rifle, the rifle of this sharpshooter nicknamed Monsieur Murder.

"It is that same villain," the *Chasseurs* liaison officer told our commandant. "You can tell by the sound of the shot. A special Mannlicher he uses; a .32, low trajectory. You Legionnaires will learn the sound of it."

We learned the sound of it, that was so. In the weeks that followed we grew only too familiar with a sharp *ping* snapping in the mountain air to be echoed by a shriek from one of our comrades. Those Austrians across the valley were Tyrolean *Jagers*, you understand, and we began to wish ourselves back on the Marne with the Prussians. The word *Jager* means "hunter," and those mountain-bred Austrians set out to prove it did not mean anything else. Most particularly our friend, Monsieur Murder.

The commandant collared Sandhurst and me and called us names. We were supposed to be the crack shots of the company. What was the matter with us?

Sandhurst wept with rage and promised to kill Monsieur Murder or go without his supper, and as a result he went without his supper. How can you shoot an adversary you cannot see? Sandhurst and I, we watched like hawks until our eyes went sore from focusing field glasses. We lay in wait and figured and snipe-shot trying to hit that elusive gun-flash, but that deadly Mannlicher expert was a wizard.

Out! I am telling you that *Jager* sharpshooter across the valley from us was a ghost and a wraith. Tuesday the shot would come from a clump of rocks above the Austrian trench. Friday it would whistle up from bushes down by the river at valley bottom. Sunday the gun would flash from a crag 'way off near a frost-ed mountain peak. Monsieur Murder would climb around his Austrian landscape under cover of dark, fire a daily shot and kill a daily man from some hiding place and next day deal death from somewhere else.

The affair got on the nerves of our Legionnaires and particularly on Sandhurst. Eating our miserable chestnuts and spaghetti or scratching fleas in the dugout bunk, he could think of nothing else.

"That dirty hell-hound," he would snarl. "I can picture him, Corday. Crouching like a spider on that cliff over there. One of

those thick-necked Austrian swine with spiked mustaches and shaved head and little sausage eyes. Singing his hymns of hate and gurgling like a butcher each time he kills one of us."

It made no difference to Sandhurst when word came, by round-about means, that Monsieur Murder had enlisted—and was killing—only because he feared that his home town was about to be invaded. Sandhurst did not choose to believe that story. He tortured himself with mental visions of Monsieur Murder as one of those hairy, gloating, war-loving Boche—the blood and iron type that was scaring us all the time. And what was worse, poor Sandhurst seemed to hold himself responsible for that killer across the valley. He had that Puritan zeal in his make-up.

"I should have got him to-day. When he shot Gaspard Donjon. Saw the flash and fired instantly and—and missed. God give me strength to kill that devil! Just give me one real look at him, Corday. One look!"

Then, one day, we had a real look. A colonel somewhere snug behind the lines decided he needed information concerning this bunch of Austrian *Jagers*, and ordered a raid. Swim the river at night, die like horses if necessary, but bring back an Austrian or two. It would be a dirty job, and as

such it was assigned to *La Legion Etrangere*, our detachment.

2

SANDHURST SOBBED when the commandant would not let him go. Snipers, it seemed, could not be risked. So we had to stay behind (you think I was sorry?) while a squad went over one dark and rainy night to pay those *Jagers* a call. We could hear the guns and see the flame-balls of grenades on the opposite mountain, also we listened to the *pang!* of Monsieur Murder's sharpshooting Mannlicher. *Alors*, three Legionnaires returned and brought a pair of weeping captives with them.

We had lost ten men to capture that pair, and the good God knows what any colonel could have learned from them because they might have been deaf mutes. But one of them had a wallet in his belt, and in that miserable wallet we found a clipping. Sandhurst the Yankee and I were ordered to search the prisoners, and Sandhurst yelled when he fished that river-soaked, faded piece of newspaper from the wallet. He could read German, you comprehend, and he held that news item up against the lamp in the commandant's dugout and ground the words out of clenched teeth. The item had been clipped from a Vienna newspaper, *Der Tag*.

" 'War Hero,' " Sandhurst translated the headline. " 'Bravest among our men on the mountain front is the Great Johanne, world's greatest rifle shot, formerly with Schoenhut's Winter Circus, famed attraction in Viennese music halls. All will remember the wonderful sharpshooting feats of this Johanne whose performance with the rifle never failed to astound an audience. Born of a family renowned in the military annals of Austria, Johanne now embellishes a brave career in our battle line as a Tyrolean *Jäger*. Austria may well pay homage to this brave hero and defender. Photograph below pictures Johanne wearing the marksman's medal cast from gold donated by the Hapsburg family and pinned there by the Emperor's own hand. The foe may well cower before this deadly gun, and it is reported the French have named Johanne—Monsieur Murder.' "

Well, that was pretty, was it not? *Nom du Nom!* Our Monsieur Murder was none other than a circus performer called the Great Johanne, and, what was more, a trick rifle shot, an expert of experts. I could imagine the fellow in pink tights and waxed mustache shooting the spots from playing cards or holding the rifle behind his back and standing on his head and puncturing colored balloons high up on the theater proscenium. That was the news story about the rival

sharpshooter, and it explained a lot of wonderful shooting. And underneath this story was a picture.

It was soaked and thumb-smudged by the worshipful private who had saved the clipping, and newspaper photographs are seldom human, but at least we could have a glimpse of this Nemesis of ours. The picture showed a soldier in all the strappings and stiffness of the goose-step Austrian uniform.

Standing stiff and straight as a ramrod with toes pointed out in polished military boots and a chest glittering with the Emperor's medal.

There was the deadly Mauser target rifle with its grim telescopic sights held at "present arms," the very engine that had been such a curse to us in our mountain trench. The face was shadowed by the chin-straps and coal-scuttle helmet, but it looked like the face of a proud boy; and Sandhurst cursed at it as if it were the photograph of Satan come to haunt him.

"Look at him, Corday! One of those arrogant, aristocratic Austrian brats born with a gun in his hand and told to go out and kill for the Fatherland and glory. Fed on pomp and medals and the applause of the crowd. A circus exhibitionist—he probably showed off by killing white doves—and a trained assassin! One of those

swanking, murdering, military curs!"

THE SUMMER and fall that followed were not nice. It rained in a steady stream, and our little bunch of Legionnaires was stalemated in that high Alpine quagmire on a cliff, billeted in scudding clouds and mud, marooned and forgotten by a war that had traveled to some other planet and left us to rot guarding that useless pass. The river continued to flood the valley bottom, and the Austrian *jugos* of Tyrol continued to watch us from their gallery on the opposite escarpments. There also was the Great Johanne, the diabolical circus sharpshooter, making our lives a hazard and picking us off piecemeal; and on our side there was Sandhurst, a mud-plastered statue of Retribution in his shooting-blind, returning death for death, even Stephen.

The Yankee lived and breathed and kept alive on the one desire to fetch the Austrian sniper low. I do not know when he slept, for he sat up in our dugout all night fiddling with the sights on his Lebel, cleaning and oiling the mechanism, cursing and praying and staring hot-eyed at that photograph pasted on the stock. All day he would stand at his post with the wind and the rain blowing through him, the flesh wrinkling on his bones, his hair going gray

and his face like a skull but for the two live coals of his eyes as they swept the Austrian cliff with binoculars or squinted down the barrel of the rifle for a quick shot.

Each time Monsieur Murder shot a man, Sandhurst would stare like agony until he had evened the score, and Heaven only knows the number of Austrians he dropped into graves on that distant mountainside. But he executed plenty, and our commandant told somebody far away, and Sandhurst was given a medal of his own to wear. He laughed at the medal—a strained, high-pitched purr of a laugh he'd developed that summer. By God, no! He was no glitter-loving Hun! He would wear no decoration until he had earned it, he said, and that would not be until he had slain that scoundrel assassin across the valley.

He tucked the medal into a hip pocket and swore never to show it until he could wipe that photograph from his rifle butt. I tell you, every time that Yankee Legionnaire spoke of Monsieur Murder his eyes glittered hate like a crazy man's, and I finally began to understand. That Austrian sniper represented all that Sandhurst hated; to the Yankee, Monsieur Murder was the very spirit of Austria itself, the soul of the War, the black heart of Mars. *Cher* and the picture of this Great Johanne had eaten

itself into young Sandhurst's head like a cancer to torture his nights and burn him by day, and he could not get rid of it until he had shot the fellow. And, as if intending to drive Sandhurst the crazier, Monsieur Murder had been using dum-dum bullets these last weeks, breaking more of the rules. *Pushhu!*

THERE ARRIVED a morning of bitter cold drizzle when the valley was vague in rain clouds and the little shooting galleries were drenched, and under cover of the downpour a *Chasseurs* dispatch bearer got through to our Legion outpost with a message. Artillery was going to enter the game. A battery of French mountain guns was going to roll into position on the heights behind us, and tomorrow that batch of Tyrolean *Jagers* would be erased by shellfire from the face of the earth. *Bien*, the stalemate would be broken. Our *Legionnaires* need only swim the laundry suds river, and stroll into the shell-pulverized enemy camp.

Those Legion dogs set up a cheer when the commandant told the news. All but Elihu Sandhurst, the Yankee. Do you think he cheered? No, he did not. He ran to tell me where I roasted chestnuts in our dugout, and his eyes were blazing like Easter candles in the Holy Cave of Saint Anselmo.

"Shells! They are going to wipe out those Austrians with shells! No, I tell you. They cannot! They cannot kill Monsieur Murder like that. He's mine, Corday! *Mine!*"

"How do you care how they kill that villain?" I asked him. "This is no private feud, *mongars*. Let the shells blow him to kindling and be damned. Thank the good God it will be the end of him."

You see, I was wrong. It was a private feud to Sandhurst's way of thinking. All spring and summer and fall he had been wearing himself to a skin-and-bones scarecrow trying to get that Austrian killer, and he was not going to be cheated of his chance. Snatching his Lebel, he dashed out into the rain and fled up the trench to his little private niche.

Right unwillingly I followed him, crying at him to be careful. He was careful, all right. A tigerish craft animated his starved face as he hunched there among the shapeless sandbags and turned his field glasses on that distant Austrian trench. The valley below us was curtained by the November shower and the cliffs across the river were blurred as a spoiled camera film.

"In the name of Heaven, come back to the dugout," I advised the Yankee. "Get out of this infernal rain."

"He's up there somewhere!" Sandhurst was studying the bush-

dotted ridges that faded into clouds above the enemy trench.

"But you cannot see anything today," I told him. "Come away."

"I'm sticking. They can't do it, Corday. They can't kill him with shells. That cheating, dum-dum shooting assassin is *mine*, and—Corday! *Look!*"

I looked. Aunt of the Devil how I looked. Sandhurst snarled.

"There's a man up there. Moving in those bushes!" The way he said it sent shivers up my spine to my ears, and you can fancy I grabbed my rifle in a hurry. I swung my Lebel and had that doll-like target in the sights.

"No!" Sandhurst's elbow flung me off the firing step. "It's *him!*"

I do not know how the Yankee knew. His Lebel fired — *slam!* — and before the echo was away I saw that puny, far-off midget go down, tumble and roll like a smitten ant on that gray mountain-face. Little cries sailed up from the Austrian trench. The ant-sized figure vanished like a bug into a cluster of wet rocks. It was queer that in the whisper of the rain on that mountain landscape I thought I heard distant bugle calls. *Dieu!* Perhaps it was illusion, like the entire scene.

"I got him!" Sandhurst's screech broke that hallucination of phantom bugling in the drowned air; the howl tore out of his faded frame like a devilment released from his soul. A watery and wild scarecrow, he sprang along the parapet, dancing and squalling from an illuminated face, waving his Lebel. "I killed that sharp-shooter! Monsieur Murder! I got him!"

There was, on that far-away slope in that cluster of rocks, a flash. *Pug! Zing!* On the heels of the first explosion there was a second. The crash of a bullet bursting in Sandhurst's shoulder. Half an instant he stood paralyzed with astonishment and agony, eyes popping, jaws wide, head and shoulders lifted and frozen above the sandbags.

Smoke and blood boiled from a crimson cavity in his collarbone, and I do not like to remember his face as I saw it in that split minute-tick. Pain is bad enough, but this was mingled with something else. Frustration? Fury? Despair? But then he toppled like a chopped tree and fell, his shoulder shattered by one of those savage *Erichschapottouen* — the wicked little explosive

Don't Miss the eerie adventure of the
WOLVES OF DARKNESS

by Jack Williamson

in the November **MAGAZINE OF HORROR**

bullets that burst when they enter a man's body. We carried him, white as a corpse, to the dugout. Again I suffered the illusion that bugles were echoing in the rain. Two minutes later a mad motor-cycle rider whirled into our trench to tell us the Armistice had been signed.

3

NOW THE WAR was over, but the story is not finished because Elihu Sandhurst the Yankee was not. I do not know what New England is like, but there must be something hard in its people, something flinty and granite in their souls, something that does not let them die. In the Soldier's Hospital at Paris, Sandhurst lay for days unconscious; then he flickered along for months while the surgeons gave him blood and wired his shoulder bones and patched a torn lung and grafted chunks of skin. I called to see him several times, but I do not believe he recognized me, and most certainly I would not have recognized him. That exploding bullet had made a mess of him, and it looked as if he would end his days in one of those gruesome isolation sanitariums the recruiting posters never tell you about — one of those mausoleums crowded with the maimed leftovers from wars.

Paris was full of the blind and

the lame those first months after the war. I was glad when our company was ordered to Mar-seilles, and there I was discharged. I decided I would rest five years before calling myself a Belgian and lying about my age and en-listing again. An old aunt of mine had been kind enough to die in Avignon and leave me a hundred thousand francs; you can imagine I considered myself a millionaire after years of service in the penny-a-day Army of the Damned. At last I could buy that cottage in some forgotten village by the sea and raise cabbages and live as a human being and a Frenchman ought to live. Ha, ha. I bought the cottage and raised five cabbages and never felt so lonely, restless and old in all my life. Provence is a quiet place. After three years of it I thought I should go mad and cut somebody's throat just for the excitement.

Meantime I had taken a touch of the gas on the Marne, and it began to work on me. I was never so glad in my life when the doctor ordered me out of that climate and told me to go for the mountains.

"Your left lung will not be sale-able as cat-meat if you do not in-hale mountain air," he told me. "You must go the the Alps. High altitudes. Drink some milk and sky instead of this red wine. Ha! I know just the place. It is cheap and good and the finest air in the

world. A nice village where you can go hunting. Take a vacation."

"Where is this mountain Paradise?" I asked him.

"I used to spend holidays there," he told me. "It is called Notschburg. You go to Vienna and then southwest into the Tyrolean Alps. Have you ever been in the Tyrolean Alps?"

Had I ever been there? I had to laugh, you can imagine. Back to Austria to get well. Ironical, was it not?

ALORS, I SOLD the cottage and five cabbages and came out of the deal with a Citroen car. And so it was that I drove into Austria and motored into the mountain roads and chugged one fine day into the Alpine village of Notschburg. It was the jewel of a place, high in the wooded mountains with frosted peaks looming against the sky and yodelers and cows and a promise of mountain goat and wild boar. A little village of tile roofs and cobbled streets, and a fine old inn tucked under the mountainside. The Stag's Head, of course.

Mon Dieu, what a pleasant retreat. A drinking room of square tables and copper flagons. Waiters in short leather breeches and bright suspenders and hobnailed boots. You know the Alpine atmosphere. And the owner of the inn was a pretty Austrian girl—Frau-

ein Luschene—smiling and charming with yellow hair wound in a braid about her forehead and busy arms. Do not say a Frenchman has no eye for feminine attraction. The little *fräulein* may have been about twenty-five years in age, but she was made like a goddess and a pleasant hostess, that is so. *Out*. You would have thought I was her father.

"A veteran of the war? But what a pity. You are welcome here, my old one. Come, this will be like your home. And there is another of your soldiers here. You must make friends."

That was where I took a surprise, for that other soldier of mine was Elihu Sandhurst the Yankee. Sacred pipe! but I got a fine surprise when I met him in that Alpine inn. I could not believe my eyes. His hair was gray as salt and there was a droop in his shoulder and his body was spare as a poplar tree, but he looked tanned and hard as brown iron.

"Sandhurst! Well, I am one pepper mill! How does it go?"

"Never felt better in my life!" he growled at me. "Discharged from the hospital last year."

We pounded each other on the back, and I asked him how long he had been here in Notschburg. He told me he had been living at the inn for the last six months, hunting and getting into good health, and for five months before

that he had been on a walking tour of Austria, tramping all over the country and visiting Vienna. That was another surprise, when I remembered how this New England fire-eater had hated the Austrians; now here he was in the Tyrol, living at an Austrian inn and having a good time.

You will like it here," he told me. "We will go hunting and have a splendid vacation together. I have not forgotten how to shoot."

Problem! the man was as expert with his rifle as ever. He had a veritable arsenal of target arms in his room, and the following three weeks we spent tramping by day through the mountain woods, I with my mouth open as I watched that Yankee knock hawks out of the sky and drill wild goats on far-off crags. But Sandhurst was not quite what you call good company. I was not surprised that he made no mention of the war or the Legion or past days in that time we spent together. The war had staled on all of us, *oui!* Only the man did not talk at all, just tramped along smoking pipe after pipe, with no expression on his face as if his thoughts were miles away.

EVENINGS AT the inn he would sit off by himself reading newspapers. One after another he would read. And that was another surprise. Sandhurst was not read-

ing papers from home, from his America. He was reading the Austrian newspapers, the journals from Vienna and Innsbruck and Modling and other towns. Wondering what he was reading, I would peek over his shoulder and spell out the German. Do you think he was reading news and editorials? *Non!* Undoubtedly this former Yankee law student was sick of all that and wanted diversion, for he would always be reading the "personal" columns the funny little notices about, "Hans. Come home. All is forgiven. Hedwig." or "Will trade bicycle for Swiss clock." I have noticed that Americans and Englishmen enjoy reading those columns.

I wondered if Sandhurst was not going back to his New England and the law schools, but he made no mention of it at all. There were a lot of veterans stranded in Europe in those days, men wandering aimlessly about as if bewildered now that the noise and fire were gone. As I say, the Yankee was restless and silent. The only one he would talk to was the little hostess of the inn, Fraulein Luschene. *Nom du Nom!* At last I began to see, and I had to chuckle to myself. The good *fräulein* and that New England Yankee. Ha Ha. The little side glances and the welcome smiles. The way Sandhurst always looked up when she went by. The cheerful blue in her

eyes when he came down for his breakfast in the morning. Ho ho.

"So that is why he stays in this village of the Tyrol," I grinned to myself. "What a queer world it is. This veteran of the French Foreign Legion and this Austrian girl."

Well, I went around chuckling to myself like an old fool who has seen two young ones exchanging valentines. It was all very pretty and idyllic 'way up there in the Tyrolean Alps with the spring flowers blossoming and the dawns and sunsets and cowbells. I was glad for Sandhurst, too. He was a serious chap, and serious fellows like that need a wife to cheer them up and take them home.

I began to plot like a writer of love stories. Aunt of the Devil! can you fancy me, old Thibaut Corday, veteran of the Foreign Legion and bullet-scars and whiskers and cursing—trying to play Cupid? I should have known better, that is so, but I guess the gas poisoning had gone from my lungs to my brains. I was a fool and a fish-monger's wife that day I decided to put my finger in the pie! Ha! Fate does not like retired Legionnaires trying to tie ribbons in His hair. Fate should have kicked me in the pants.

"Sandhurst is lonely and broken up by the war," I simpered to myself, "and he is morose and does not know he is in love. That *fräulein* is a nice little girl. I will

arrange a little party and maybe the Yankee will stop moping and go into action."

Out! My intentions were the kindest. A Frenchman's always are. And so I invented that picnic and asked the Yankee and the *fräulein* to go driving with me and my Citroën into the mountains. The little *fräulein* was most agreeable, and the Yankee, of course, could not refuse. Off we went with a picnic basket, me driving in the front seat with the Yankee and the girl in the back seat. I watched them in the windshield mirror and chuckled like an old woman when I saw them holding hands. Was I not a sweet cabbage? Somebody should have stepped on my head when I was young.

OFF I DROVE down the mountain road, and about noon I halted the car on a high ridge some fifty miles from the village, and said, "This is a beautiful spot, my friends. Let us eat our lunch here!"

Bones of the Little Corporal! I will never forget what happened then. Sandhurst stood up in the seat behind me and pointed a shaking finger. His face was the color of something you might find under a log, and his eyes gleamed like the beads of nails. "Corday!" he strangled at me. "Look at that! Do you know where we *are*?"

And then I saw. The valley and

the river channeling down the bottom like a flood of laundry suds. The steep cliffs lifting against the blue and the mountain face dotted with mounds of rock and shrub. We were on the Austrian side, but I recognized that valley as if I had seen it only yesterday. Fell me with a feather, if I had not driven us squarely to the place where a batch of Legion dogs had fought a bunch of Tyrolese *Jagers* that fearful last year of the war!

The trenches were hidden in green brush. Nature is quick to heal the wounds inflicted on her by man. Man does not heal his self-inflicted scars as easily. Sandhurst was shaking like a victim of the ague, and the little *fräulein* from the inn cried out when she saw his face.

I drove out of there at a speed that almost ripped the engine from the Citroen, but my little love spell was spilled to a muss. The luncheon was like eating chalk, with Sandhurst staring dead-eyed into space and Fraulein Laschene trying painfully to cheer him out of it. *Sacre cochon!* We got back to the inn at six, and the Yankee slammed straight to his room, and I did not see him all evening. Next morning he was not there for breakfast and at lunch time the little Austrian girl came to ask me where he was. You should have seen her eyes, I tell you. Like a

mother who has lost a child.

"Here are his newspapers." She laid the bundle by my plate. "Have you no idea where he is? He left the inn before breakfast and he has always come to me for his mail."

I told her there was no accounting for the moods of Americans, and she went away smiling a trifle. But she knew something was wrong, and so did I. Bones and blood, but I did! For I picked up the little morning paper published by the village, and the first thing I saw was a notice in the front page personal column. It came up off the paper and slapped me in the eyes with a handful of German letters and made me spill my coffee in my lap:

Sharpshooter wanted. Attention, please. If a certain sniper, formerly of Tyrolean Jagers stationed in pass below Notschburg — known to the French as Monsieur Murder and advertised in Vienna as the Great Johannes, one-time circus performer — is not a coward in hiding, he will, on reading this, come to the Harz Bier Garten on the main square of this village and meet one anxious to challenge him. Believing the Great Johannes to be a cowardly swine, I will, nevertheless, be waiting at a corner table.
— THE MAN WITH THE DARK HAT.

IT DID NOT need any gossip little bird to tell me who that man with the dark hat would be. I jumped up from the table and went shin-banging upstairs to Elihu Sandhurst's room. My knock threw the door open, and I floundered in.

The Yankee, of course, was not there. His bed was in a heap, as if he had jumped from sleep in a hurry, and the room was in untidy disarray. Clothing lay on the floor and a big pile of old newspapers had been spilled from a shelf. Grabbing at the papers, I fumbled through several, examining those personal columns. *Fichte!* I might have known Sandhurst was not idling away his evenings among those items for nothing. There it was in the Vienna daily, *Der Tag*. Again in the Heidelberg *Zeitung*. In every last one of them. That impossible notice. "Sharpshooter wanted!"

Sacred foot! So that was the reason of the Yankee's walking tour across Austria, the reason for his sojourn in this Alpine mountain retreat. He had been hunting, that was so. Hunting that rival sharpshooter of three years ago, the Great Johanne of the circus, the deadly Monsieur Murder! Could it be the Yankee did not know the war was over? Or had this hatred gone on and on inside

him until it had driven him mad?

It whitened my whiskers for me to think of it, yes, it did. I left the inn as carelessly as I could, but when I got to the village streets I ran. It was after one o'clock when I found the Harz Bier Garten. Was I in time? And there, by the oath of Saint Sebastopol, was Elihu Sandhurst sitting at a corner table and reading the morning paper with a black hat pulled over his eyes. Otherwise, except for me and a fat German sleeping by the gate, the beer garden was without any customers.

"Sandhurst!" He jumped as I grabbed his sleeve.

"In the name of God, what are you doing? I saw that thing in the paper—You must be insane!" I panted at him. Somehow he looked very strange, that afternoon, in civilian clothes. "You must not act this way. This Johanne, this Monsieur Murder—we are in his country now. He—he can take offense. He might kill you . . ."

Sandhurst laughed, and that laugh sent icicles sliding down my spine. "Him? Kill *me*? Never! Never in a fair contest, no! Back there in that valley I was no match for him, but I have been practising, practising. And I will challenge that cheating devil to a fair fight and drill him through the shoulder as he shot me with his cheating explosive bullets and . . ."

I tell you it turned the afternoon

sunshine green, and I had to shiver, looking at the man. The expressionless face and those eyes like polished marbles of lead. "But the war is over!" I blanded. "Why do you —"

The Yankee's hands flew up and caught me by the lapels of my coat. "I am not through with him, Corday," he whispered through his teeth. "Austria has paid, yes. But not that one! Not that smirking, medal-loving swine of a circus exhibitionist who blew me to pieces with slugs!"

The dull lead was gone from his eyes; once again they were flickering like Easter candles; mad as a batter. *Once*, he had been too long in that mountain trench, hoping, praying, studying that opposite cliff with binoculars. He had lain too long on that mattress of agony in the hospital.

"Monsieur Murder put me there! Two solid years, fighting pain, death. Two years lost of my life. Lying on my back. Sweating with those splintered bones in this cursed shoulder, those holes in my lung. The Great Johanne did that! If he fought fair, used regulation bullets, it would be different.

"He will not come, however, have no fear!" Sandhurst was snarling. "That dog is a black-guard and a coward. A whole year I've been running my ad in the papers and no reply. Surely he

has seen and told him. But never an answer, and so I know him for a coward and a scoundrel and a cheat . . ."

"Please! Oh, please! My friends!"

I WHIRLED around. Fraulein Luschem stood there against the lattice, pale as a fragile ghost, her eyes dark with pain, hands wringing the corner of her starched apron. She must have followed me all the way from the inn, running. Heaven knew how long she had been standing there, how much she had heard. But Sandhurst's newspapers were under her arm; and she stood there looking at him in a way that did something to my throat.

"Herr Sandhurst! My dear American . . ."

That brought his head up, so! He stood up and reached for her hand. There were tears in her eyes, too.

"Please! Cannot you forget this — this awful sharpshooter? The war is over long ago. Come. Do not cherish this hate because — because there is one Austrian who — who loves you . . ."

"Elsa!" His face was screwed up with veins on his forehead. Something terrible was going on inside him; a frightful inner conflict; all the pent-up hatred built in his soul against that Boche sharpshooter was struggling with the

fact that this Austrian girl loved him. Yes, she had told him so. Her face told him. "Come," her expression seemed to say. "Forget this desire for revenge. Forgive. Come with me. Come away . . ."

"No!" It tore out of his throat like the sound of a wound being inflicted; he stiffened like a ramrod, fanaticism fanned to fresh blaze in his eyes. "You don't understand, Elsa! I—I can love nobody until my duty, as I see it, is done. I can't run away from my duty, Elsa! Until I meet this Great Johanne, this cur who *cheated* me . . ." He shook his fist over his hat. "God! If the yellow coward would only show himself, give me my chance!"

He was stone, then. Stone! I remember how Fraulein Luschem simply dropped her hands on her apron as if she had forgotten them, turned and hurried out of that quaint beer garden. How I waited the afternoon behind an oak, peeping frantic apprehension to see if anyone came to meet Sandhurst at his awful rendezvous. And how, when dusk was the only visitor, Sandhurst slouched from the beer garden with his hat over his face, stole back to the inn and sneaked to his room.

A storm muttered in the mountains where the sun had gone; it was a sultry evening; gay villagers foregathered in the drinking room

to dine and dance and sing their Heidelberg songs.

At nine o'clock of the night I could stand it no longer. I would go to Sandhurst; plead with him for the girl; tell him he was a fool. I jumped up; went to his room. But I did not tell him. The door was ajar when I got there; and that was how I was chance witness to an incredible scene.

5

SANDHURST WAS standing in the middle of the floor, a candlestick in hand, back toward me where I gawked on the threshold. The Yankee was staring at the window—one of those long windows with double blinds—that opened on a little balcony. The blinds were closed, but the shutters in the blinds were open so that a figure shadowed against them on the balcony outside was dim and weird as a cinema screen.

"Who's out there?" Sandhurst was snarling. "Who knocked?"

Heaven strike me dead, some one *was* out there on that balcony. Some one like a specter, a visitation come to wake Sandhurst from his bed.

"You are the man in the black hat? I watched you come here. So sorry I was late at the beer garden. You wish to meet me?"

It was a strange low whisper coming through the blinds. A voice

that wrapped me in ice, where I stood the unobserved spectator. Sandhurst glared at that apparition.

"Monsieur Murder!"

"So your army named me," was the low-pitched reply. "At your service."

I could not speak. *You!* not a sound could I get out of me, and I wanted to shriek at the fellow out here and tell him my friend was sick and mad, tell him to go away. But I could only stare, pop-eyed; and at that moment the sky beyond the inn lighted with a wavy flame from storm clouds and the figure on the balcony sprang into view. Just an instant it was there, but clear enough—too clear, I swear—for Sandhurst and me to see.

You remember that photograph found on the *Jäger* prisoner our Legion dogs had captured. I tell you, it was as if that picture had come to life size and speaking in the lightning glow.

There it was. The same goose-step Austrian uniform and polished boots. The chest with its glittering medallion pinned there by the Emperor's own hand. The face a boyish oval shadowed by the coal-scuttle helmet and gleaming chin straps. *Out*, and in the gloved hands of that breathing ghost was that Mannlicher .32 with the telescopic sights, the rifle that had sniped us down piecemeal and de-

livered Sandhurst's final blow. The lightning flamed out with a distant mumbling, but the Great Johanne was still there.

"You called me a coward," the voice whispered. "You wish to arrange a meeting?"

I had the horrible feeling that the thing out there on the balcony was no substance, but dead, the creature of a dream. Sandhurst was like that, too.

He put down the candlestick, swiftly and silently rummaged through his rifles with was hands. Then he had snatched a bundle from his stack of guns. I choked where I stood when I saw what it was. His service rifle, the old *Label* of his Legion days! *Out!* It was the same gun, polished and oiled in its flannel wrappings. His fingers shook as he tore at the cloth, then he was holding the rifle in a fist of white bones, and I saw that little photograph pasted on the stock like some outlandish baggage label.

"Now!" he was panting at the window blinds. "Tonight! Right now! Ha! And use any ammunition you wish! I promise here and now you shall not touch me with it. You are willing? Fair fight and even, with you on one side of the valley and me on the other . . ."

"I am willing. The valley where the river flows . . ."

The same place. We can—we can call a cab . . ."

"I already have a car below. You will ride with me, then? Come . . ."

It was gone. Sandhurst rushed to the blinds, hurled them open and followed that burglarish shadow's path across the balcony. I heard feet landing on the gravel drive below; then the thrum of a car wheeling off in the dark. Why did I not scream and arouse the inn? I could not. It seemed a year before I could uproot my feet in this nightmare that was happening so fast.

I dashed through the Yankee's emptied room, gained the balcony, leaned over the rail in time to catch the vanishing tail light of a touring car. Monsieur Murder was a ghostish gleam in the front; Sandhurst was crouched over his rifle in the back seat. Away to the north a mountain peak took fire and whisked out. Thunder slammed. A little shower of rain hit me in the face as I shinned down to the gravel and sprinted, gasping oaths, for my parked car.

IF I EVER drove a million miles I drove it that night with the accelerator to the floor and the tires melting on invisible wheels. I sweat to this day when I think of those mountain roads in the warm black rain, when I think of how I chased those two sharpshooters through the Alps and did not catch them, and came at last, ill

as a fish and cold as ice, to that empty touring car parked in the dark cliffs and not a man in sight and the moon just creeping through green-black storm clouds over the valley.

I was sick, *oui!* The moonlight made that valley a bowl of shadows and silver, painting the rocks with phosphorus and wet trees with black enamel, and the river down the bottom like a sweeping gurgling channel of mercury.

I jumped from my car and began to run, tearing through brush and stumbling down the slope, waving my hands above my head and crying Sandhurst's name.

In three seconds I was lost in the unfamiliar terrain, running like a chicken with its head cut off, no sense and no direction, shouting at shadows and leaping in frenzy at every stick that snapped underheel. That was the sound I feared most. A smart, sharp crack like a breaking stick. Or a deadly *ping!*

I could vision those two creeping through the brush, *c'est ça!* Creeping with rifles ready, anxious to swing and fire. I knew how the Yankee would start it. "You go this way. I'll go that. In twenty minutes we'll start tracking each other down. Even Stephen, and shoot at sight."

Holy Saint Antoine, but it made the blood run like ice water in my veins, *oui*, and there was no way of catching them to stop it.

How I cursed myself for a fool. Why had I not thought to bring the little *frankin* with me? God knows I wished she had come to call out and try to save that Yankee maniac she loved. Then I was glad she had not come to witness this barbarous nightmare. They might have shot her by accident; and they might shoot me as I floundered and spilled downhill in the moonlit dark.

Can you imagine such a picture? That valley in the moonlight under the Alpine peaks, the shadows and trees and underbrush sloping to the river bank, the Yankee and the Austrian snipers creeping about on that dark mountain face, each waiting to get a sight, a pot-shot at the other?

And suddenly I saw Monsieur Murder! It was like a phantom conjured in front of me, so still and silent was the figure there. A mound of moonlit rocks not thirty feet ahead of me and downhill. On that exposed hummock the soldier appeared like the shadow of an upraised statue; one moment it had not been there, next moment there it was; I had not heard it come; there was only that gurgling sound of rainwater draining through brush and wind in wet trees.

Yes, there was that Austrian sharpshooter, the gray *jager*'s uniform like cloth of smoke, moonlight gilding the metal helmet, the

rifle uplifted, the wan night-shine making of that stiff-posed military figure something outlandish as a mesmerism drifted to a stockstill on those rocks before me. *Merci de Dieu!* what a pose. For the head was bent and the rifle was steady and pointing. That Mannlicher was trained on a jumble of briars that sprawled across the landscape not thirty rods farther down the mountain.

ON THAT SAME instant I saw Sandhurst. He was straight in the sights of that waiting Mannlicher, moving through the thicket of briars. I saw the shaking of the twigs, the glint of the Lebel barrel. Monsieur Murder saw it, too. I swear I could hear the Austrian draw breath; the grim, gray figure stiffened and congealed like something turning cold. I want to tell you, I turned cold myself, choked with tension; wanting to shriek and unable to breathe in that air that was ready to snap like a drawn violin string.

Smash! It had to come. Flame burst in the shadows and the silence was breaking porcelain. That shot cracked every nerve in my head; sprung me out of paralysis like a jumping-jack. Mother of Mary! I could not believe. In the pond of moonlight, on the rock mound, the Austrian sharpshooter sagged. The Great Johanne, the circus marksman, the deadly *jager*

sniper had held the trigger too long. I heard the Mannlicher clatter to the stones, heard a sigh and the thump of a fall.

Sandhurst broke screaming from the briars, his smoking Lebel swinging above his windblown hair, face ablaze under the moon.

"I got him! I brought him down! It was fair!"

I guess I hollered, too. Hollered and charged to meet the victorious Yankee at the side of that crumpled figure. The Great Johanne lay face down on the rocks, blood flowing from a hole in the shoulder-blades of the gray uniform.

"Even and fair," Sandhurst husked at me. "An honest duel. Square in the shoulder like he got me. In the collarbone. I . . ."

His voice choked out in a whistly gasp. I was turning that limp form on its back, and all at once I had to choke, too. The face in the wobbly coalscuttle helmet—the face upturned in the brightness of moonlight. The blue eyes opening to smile at Sandhurst. Thunder of God!

Sandhurst stood like one stabbed, snow on his forehead.

"You had to do it, my dear one," the girl whispered. "Fair and even. That other time—when I tumbled into these very same rocks—the wound healed easily. And this one does not hurt at all . . ."

"Why?" Sandhurst screamed. "Why didn't you tell me? Why

didn't you show me your face when we came in the car tonight?

Oh, my God—"

"It did not hurt before. It will not hurt now."

"I hit you that day?" The Yankee rocked her in his arms. "I hit you that time before? And you managed to shoot back at me? Oh, God, why didn't you *kill* me . . ."

"I am so glad I did not. And so many, many times I had tried. You see—we thought your soldiers would capture our village—that was why I fought—And that day when you shot me—such fine marksmanship—my comrades had called me out of hiding. They said the Armistice was signed. I was running to them—you touched me beautifully . . ."

Those Tyrolean soldiers had heard the news before we did. *Ventre bleu!* (I have often wondered, since, how many soldiers died in those last indefinite minutes of that cursed war.)

The little Fraulein Luschem smiled at us with blue eyes. "I deserved this return engagement," she whispered. "My brave American! I was angry when I took that last shot at you. I should have known the message of peace had not yet reached your men. Forgive me about the *Einkusspatroneu*, my dear one. We were desperate, and they were the last of

the bullets I had. After I fired it I swore never to fire another. The Great Johanne—that stupid stage name—would run an inn for veterans and—have peace . . . ”


Elihu Sandhurst carried her in his arms up the mountain. I do not say it is so, but I swear I heard again those bugles blowing far away.

But the low clear notes might have been a church bell in some shrine.

OLD THIBAUT CORDAY, veteran of the Foreign Legion, blew his nose and chuckled in his copious beard. “The world lost a magnificent artist when the Great Johanne quit her career,” he said softly. “There was one marksman who could shoot! The little *frulein* must have been even more wonderful on the stage because she could act. When I think of her posing

there in the moonbeams on that rock mound, playing the target for the Yankee’s shot, waiting for his bullet to come with never a flinch—*there* was a performance! But women will do wonderful things for those they love. I fully believe she saved Sandhurst’s reason, and I know she saved his soul.”

Thibaut Corday grinned then. “That man Sandhurst was a genius with a gun, but a better lawyer. Now he is a big diplomat in the disarmament conferences to keep people from butchering each other. The little *frulein* married him. They took those marksmen’s medals of theirs—the one pinned on her by Franz Josef and the Legion medal he had refused to wear—and melted them together and made a wedding ring. It is a pity the nations of this ridiculous world cannot follow their example.”



THUNDER DECK

by R. V. GERY

TIME: Around 1910

PLACE: The High Seas between Havana and Cadiz

The **BLACKSTONE** was one of those rusty, rickety tubs you used to find in those days, cargo-snupping about the ports. And her master and crew weren't any greatshakes, either. Mutiny lay around the corner at any moment. But there was a passenger aboard the **BLACKSTONE** whose presence made this the strongest mutiny ever.

IT WAS IN Havana it started—let's see—around 1910, before the war, and I was on my second ship, a raw young whelp of a deckhand. The *Blackstone*, she was, and a fine old Lloyd's delight, by jiminy—one o' them rusty, rickety tubs you used to find them days, cargo-snuppin' about the ports. Bit here an' bit

there, general stuff; anything at all to fill up space, an' then away to the next one. She'd been muckin' round the West Indies for a month or better, and now she was pretty well full up with her usual box o' tricks, and headed east, for this very spot we're in now—Cadiz first, and then the Mediterranean, if she ever got there, which looked



plenty of a toss-up, to judge by her general layout.

Wayne was her master's name, an' he wasn't any better found than she was herself. Fat old boy with a walrus mustache and an eye like a dead codfish; ought to've been ashore long ago, but hangin' on the way some o' these jere-myddlers do. Pretty useless—an' the rest of 'em weren't no better. Morgan and Todd, the first and second mates, and Taggart, the engineer—poor stuff, I'd say now, officerin' a vessel on her last legs. An' she'd a crew o' scamps and sweepin's that'd fair make you cry. Oh, she was a beauty, the *Black*

Star—no end of a beauty, believe you me!

Well, she was in Havana harbor, ready for sea—an' I'd been up in the town, explorin' like a youngster will. In them days, around 1910, Havana was just a plain seaport, an' a feller could hit the beach without bein' got up like a comic op'ra admiral, the way it became later on.

I'd been nosin' into all manner of places, some of 'em where a pup of nineteen didn't have any

business—an' round midnight I was goin' down one o' the streets leadin' to the water. It was dark as the inside of a cow, except' for a light now an' then from a window, and I dare say I wasn't none too steady on me pins. Anyhow, about 'arfway down the street there's a fire-an'-brinstone burst o' Spanish, right under me nose. Seemed I'd took liberties with someone, although I'll pass you me word I never felt a thing.

"Oh!" I says. "Sorry, mister—no offense meant, I'm sure!"

THERE WASN'T any answer for a minute. I could just see the bloke, kind o' dim in the queer light. He'd pulled away a step or two an' was lookin' at me.

"*Jeghs*!" he says then, in a funny cracked kind of voice.

"English, yes," says I. "And I'm sorry, whoever you are. Wasn't lookin' where I was goin', I reckon . . ."

He comes closer—a rum-look-in' little cove, with a wisp o' beard on his chin, an' from what I could make of him a mighty pale face.

"Your sheep—yonder . . ." he says, talkin' English; a sort of English, that is. "*Black-a-ston*", eh?"

Well, it seemed to me it wasn't any of his business, maybe; but somehow or other I heard myself answerin' him.

"Yes," I says. "*The Black-ston*

it is, mister. Anything I c'n do for you?"

AGAIN HE didn't say a word for a minute, and I could've almost sworn he'd drifted back against the wall—it was as dark as that there. But no; when he spoke he was close to me. Too close, in fact. I jumped a bit.

"It is—Cadiz she sail for?" he asked, almost whisperin', but still in that sing-song English of his. He was excited, too, I could tell by his tone. If I'd been able to see him, he'd have been pretty near dancin' with excitement, I'd have said.

"Well—yes," says I. "Cadiz it is, mister. Why? Lookin' for a berth?"

Well, b'lieve me or b'lieve me not, he never said a word. Not a sound out of him, and the black patch where he'd been looked blacker than ever all at once.

"Hey-y . . ." I said.

And then I got a proper jolt, for a pub door across the street swung open, an' a shaft o' yellow light shone out. It hit the wall, smack where the little feller had been. He wasn't there. He'd hopped it—skipped out—bolted.

"Well, blow me down!" I says, standin' there scratchin' me head like a silly fool, I make no doubt. "What kind o' jumpin'-jack show's all that? Might've said thankye, anyway!"

And with that I walked on, lookin' pretty hard all around me to see if I could spot him anywhere about. He'd made me curious, that little codger had, with his questions and his goin'-goin'-gone business. Curious, yes, an' a mite scared, too. It didn't render, somehow—'twasn't the kind o' thing a nineteen-year-old deckhand expected to run up against, not at all. I'd been thinkin' the *Blackstone* was the world's worst bet as a ship, but I don't mind admittin' I was glad to see her boat all the same.

Morris, the bos'n, was in charge of her. "Come on, come on, there!" he says, mighty crusty. "Can't hang round 'arf the night waiting for you young feller. Shove off," he says, "an' look lively about it, d'ye hear? I'm in a hurry."

It wasn't more'n a couple o' hundred yards to the *Blackstone*. Halfway out, Morris at the tiller leans forward all at once.

"Who's that forward there?" he says. "Thought there was only two of you."

Well, so there was only two of 's—another hand called Jenks, and me. I was pullin' stroke, an' took a look over me shoulder. So did Jenks.

"There's no one there, sir," I says.

Nor there was—not a soul. The bos'n rubs his fat eyes.

"Rumty!" says he. "Could 'a' sworn I see someone . . ."

With that we made the *Blackstone* an' went aboard. Top o' the ladder, Todd, the second officer, was waitin' for us. He draws the bos'n aside, out of our hearin', and for a minute they stand talkin' under the electric. Then Morris nods.

"Very good, sir!" I can hear him say. "I'll keep me eyes skinned."

"You better," says the mate, and moves away. Morris comes over to me.

"See here, young 'un!" he says. "You're a level-headed kid, an' too good to be mixed up with that riff-raff forward there. I'm warnin' you see? Don't you get your fingers into nobody else's business, these times. And if you 'ear," he says, "anything up there that isn't just accordin' to Hoyle, why you'll be doin' yourself no manner o' harm in lettin' me know."

AND HE GOES stumpin' off aft, leavin' me gapin' after him.

"Crimes!" I says. "What's all this? Smells a whole lot like trouble, feller. Better go careful . . ."

Come to think of it, it didn't look any too healthy, this whisperin', behind-the-hand stuff—not with what we'd got in the *Blackstone*'s fo'c's'le. Morris had been right about them, anyway.

They weren't any mob to go foolin' with them boys. I wasn't more than a kid meself, as the bos'n had said, but that stuck out a yard, right enough.

So I went forward kind o' quiet like, an' wonderin'. The little Spaniard I'd seen on shore had slipped me memory, and I was all took up with this other doings. And sure as eggs, I'd not stuck me nose inside that fo'c's'le before I knew somethin' was up.

Anyone who's been at sea, even for the little bit I had in them times, can tell you the same thing — there's a kind o' screwed-up, excited feelin' about a fo'c's'le where there's trouble brewin'. Bridge is different, an' so's engine room, by all accounts — anyway, I've seen 'em both go on, weeks at a time, with murder fitchin' in their fingers an' faces like plaster saints. But it don't work that way in a fo'c's'le. Seems like what's there's got to come out, an' that's why there ain't many mutinies that ever amounts to anything. Someone gives 'em away.

That's what it was like here. It was gone one in the mornin', and the freighter was due to pull out on the early tide, so by rights the hands should have been catchin' a slice o' shut-eye. But they were all awake, in their bunks, an' growlin' to themselves.

They stopped when I come in, and one of 'em — Marks his name

was, a London River particular, an' if they come worse I'll trouble you to show me 'em — speaks up.

"'Ullo, 'ullo!" he says, squintin' at me. " 'Ere's the hinfant wonder, boys. Been up in the town, no doubt, 'obnobbin' wiv 'is posh pals. Ain't goin' to stay in no fo'c's'le long, 'e ain't, gents. *Mister* Charteris, it's to be, when we scoffs that mate's ticket we're so bloomin' set on . . . "

He was askin' for a row, it looked to me, an' there was a kind of murmur from the other hunks in the dark. All the same, I wasn't havin' any — not after what I'd heard; so I laughed.

"You shove a sock in it, Charlie!" I says. "What's the matter? Somethin' eatin' you?"

He let go with string o' stuff then that ain't worth tryin' to repeat, an' I believe he'd have gone for me — with a knife as like as not — if it hadn't been for another of 'em. This chap was a big lump of a Swede called Landborg, an' he'd been in trouble with the bos'n and the bridge all trip. Dangerous swine, but now he was all butter.

"Lat him be, Charlie!" he says. "Tomorrow, maybe, I talk to him a liddle, yaw!"

AN' HE GIVES a kind of a giggle, as if he's thinkin' o' somethin' funny.

"What's up?" I says, innocent as you please.

"Up?" says he. "Why, nodings, liddle man — nodings at all. Choost a fonnny choke from Sharlie. Sleep now — und in der morning Kristell you all about it. Oh, yaw, all about it!"

Well, that was enough for me, and it'd have been enough for a blind man, I guess. They'd got somethin' up their sleeves, this lot. I turned in, but y c'n bet your life I wasn't doin' any sleepin', not with Marks an' Lundborg on the job. I yanked out a clasp-knife an' hung on to that, sweatin'. It wasn't any fun, neither. I was scared.

All the same, nothin' happened — nothin' at all, and at daylight the bos'n tumbles the whole bodlin' of us out, as per usual. To see them rummies jumpin' to orders an' hustlin' round gettin' the *Black-chin* to sea was a caution.

It'd have been funny if it hadn't been so bloomin' serious, if you get me. They'd it all planned out, sure enough — wait till we were out o' soundings an' then try somethin'. But till then it was goin' to be all fair weather, an' everybody movin' at the word.

"Yes," I says to meself, "you would, wouldn't you? Well, let's wait an' see, that's all, me fine buckaroos!"

Wait an' see it was, for we'd not been at sea a day when somethin' else turned up that made the lot of us look an' scratch our

heads. We'd a stowaway aboard, it seemed like — an' yet there wasn't anything o' the usual about this chap. Matter o' fact, he was — Well, he was disturbin'. Just plain upsettin' in his little ways.

First off, here comes Morris the bos'n, rampagin' into the fo'c's'le like a cat in the measles.

"Which o' you crimson sons o' this-an'-that," he inquires, very savage, "was muckin' around my berth last night?"

Nobody says anything, but we just stared at each other. I reckon the murder gang was figurin' out which of their own lot had been 'empted beyond his strength, as you might say, an' gone explorin' prematoor, with a gully-knife. But there's not a word out of any-one, excep' that Marks, and he's got to have his little bit o' sauce, naturally.

"Why, bosc," says he, sarcastic, "'ow could you? Surely you ain't accusin' us o' breakin' your 'allowed slumbers?"

"You stow it!" Morris says. "Come on, now, which o' you was it? It was one o' you all right, for I seen — hey, what the devil!" He stops, glarin' at one o' the hands, a little cove what was tryin' to sprout a set o' whiskers on his silly chin. "You, Mullins! You're the feller! What d'ye mean by it, eh?"

AND WITH THAT he goes

to make a pass at him, but Mullins ducks.

"Whatcher talkin' about?" he says. "'Twasn't me."

"You're a blinkin' liar," says the bos'n.

"I ain't then," says Mullins. "I was in that there berth all last night, with the stummick-ache. These chaps here'll tell you—an' the cook, 'e was doctorin' me."

Well, there wasn't any gettin' round that. Morris called the cook an' checked up, and it was true. Mullins hadn't been out o' Barbecue's sight all night. All the same, Morris didn't believe him. He scowls very bitter.

"It ~~was~~ you," he says. "Couldn't 'ave been no one else—there ain't no one on this hooker that's got a bloomin' market-garden on his puss but you. You're lyin', the whole bunch o' you, but I can't pin it on you. Just you wait, though—I'll 'ave you yet!"

And he stamps off. Marks looks round and grins.

"Well?" he says. "Any gent got any remarks to myke on that little bit o' stuff?"

At that they all began talkin' at once, gabbin' and whisperin' as usual an' chewin' the fat. But I didn't say nothin' at all. I was thinkin'. I'd remembered all at once that rum little stick in Havana, an' what the bos'n had seen—or thought he'd seen—in

that boat comin' out to the *Black-stone*. I was wonderin'; but if you'd asked me what I was wonderin', I'm blowed if I could 'a' told you myself. Only, it was queer—almighty queer.

And that night it was queerer still. About two bells in the mornin' watch, I was on the wheel. Morgan, the first, was in charge, an' the old ship was lollopin' along, rumblety-bump-clank, into the east, when here comes a devil's own delight of a yellyhootin' from the skipper's cabin.

"'Strewth!" says Morgan, an' jumps. "What's that?"

Well, we hadn't long to wait to find out, for the next news is old Wayne himself in his nightgown, his eyes startin' out of his head.

"What in th-thunder's all this?" he storms. "What kind of a watch you keepin' here, mister? Someone's been in my cabin . . ."

Morgan stares at him. "In your cabin, sir?" he asks, besittatin' like.

"Yes, damme!" says the skipper. "In my cabin, if you please. A nasty little feller with a beard. I saw him, in the light from the porthole!"

Morgan strokes his chin. I dunno whether the bos'n had been talkin' or not, but he'd got the idea all right.

"Just a minute, sir," he says. "We'll have Morris up, and figure this out. One o' the hands, maybe, walkin' in his sleep. Charteris,"

he says to me "give me that wheel a minute and go down and fetch the bos'n."

WELL, I DID, but I wasn't quite sure whether I was walkin' on me head or me heels as the sayin' is. This bloomin' business was gettin' beyond a joke, it looked to me. All the same, it wasn't for me to say anything, o' course. What was there to say, anyhow?

So I went down and routed Morris out, and I'll trouble you to imagine the kind o' humor he was in. Takin' it by an' large, there wasn't much he didn't say about skippers seein' things an' so on. But he tumbled out, all the same, an' went on deck, where the skipper was foam'in' at the mouth by now, huddled up in an old pea-coat.

"Turn the hands out!" he splutters. "I want to see the son of a soldier that's been trespassin' on my privacy! I'll—I'll skin him alive, by James!"

So the bos'n turns 'em out, an' naturally it don't do Mullins no manner o' good to say he was asleep an' dreamin'. It all comes out about the bos'n the night before, an' the upshot is Mullins is took an' clapped in irons as a lyin', twistin' hound, an' a dangerous feller to be at large, an' a few other thing that occurred to the skipper.

"Yes," he says, as Mullins is

led away to dink, "and if anyone else wants any more of it, he knows where to come. I ain't afraid of a parcel o' dock-sweepin's, so don't you think it, any of you!"

And he stamps out, same as Morris bad night before. He was a weak, blatherin' old fool, an' that mob had got him sized up all right. He wasn't out o' the fo'c's'le, hardly, when Lundborg, the Swede, an' Marks, an' the rest o' the crowd got into a huddle over in a corner, talkin' under their breaths an' carry'n' on in a way I could not understand the proper meanin' of, just then.

By an' by Marks looks over at me. "'Ow about little Percy?" he says out o' the edge of his mouth. Is 'e playin' this 'ere gyme, or 'as 'e got to be attended to first. If it's a bit o' fixin' 'e wants," he says, with a leer at me that'd have turned you seasick, "why, I don't mind obligin' the comp'ny," he says, "an' sittin' 'is little goozle while you wait!"

Now that wasn't any pretty bearin' for a youngster up against his first slab o' trouble—specially as Marks hauls out that knife of his an' comes across the floor, all hunched like a fightin' cat an' glowerin' very horrid to see. I backed into an' fumbled for me own knife—not that it'd have been worth a rap against Marks, but somethin' had to be done. This

dilly-dilly-duck business didn't suit me at all.

"Stand back, Marks!" I says. "Or I'll cut your heart out!"

Must have sounded funny enough, too, from a nineteen-year-old green boy. Anyway, it got a laugh, and Lundborg reached out and caught Marks by the shoulder.

"Shtop it!" he said. "Haf I not toldt you I would dell him all about it? Yaw. Leaf him be, I say. Boy, come here!"

Well, I went. There wasn't anything else to do. That bunch would 'a' slit my goozle, just as Marks said, for tuppence an' thought nothin' about it. It ain't often trouble starts with a gang o' their kind, but when it does it flares up quick. They'd mutinted then and there, right now. And young Henry Charteris wasn't the man to stop 'em.

SO I LET Lundborg take me by the arm an' draw me over to him. He was grinnin' all over his big ugly face an' showin' a row of yellow teeth like tombstones.

"Do nodt be afraid!" he says. "Marks, he iss only trying you out, boy! You are all righda, no? You do nodt desert your friends?"

"I don't know what you mean," I says to him, sparrin' for time, kind o' desperate. "But if it's mutiny you fellers are on, count me out, that's all. I'll have nothin' to do with it!"

Marks snarls like a wolf. "There you are!" he says. "Cut 'is ruddy throat, Kris, an' let's get on with it!"

There was a growl from the rest of 'em that made me say me prayers, but Lundborg never took no notice of it.

"Yaw!" he says, sneerin'. "Und lose der only man here dot knows navigation, eh? How often musdt I tell you, Marks? He iss pretty near mate alretty, no? He sails der ship for us . . ."

"Damned if I do!" says I.

But Lundborg don't take no manner o' notice o' that either. He catches hold o' me sudden round the arms in a grip like a bear's.

"A rope!" he grunts. "We tie him, at least—und afterwards, maybe we talk again. Now, we do nodt waste time on such liddle boys!"

So they lashed me up in a bundle an' dumped me on the floor in a corner. Marks and Lundborg started in, drillin' the rest in the dark. I heard it all, an' believe me it wasn't so nice. They'd guns, some of 'em, and they were goin' to use 'em, too. It looked wicked bad for old Wayne an' the rest o' them aft there, unless the bos'n had his ears skinned.

Well, they went out then—slip-pin' away one by one. The *Blackstone* wasn't one o' these modern affairs with electrics in every corner and the whole ship under

the eye o' the bridge, as you might say. There was plenty o' shadow under the rail and so on, and anyhow the night was as dark as ink—just the kind o' thing for the rush these devils were plannin'.

They left me in the dark, with plenty to think about, too. I'd heard tell o' this sort o' bobbery before—mutiny, I mean—but I'd not expected to run across it in the raw so soon, naturally.

IT WAS TOO much of a puzzler to stick a nineteen-year-old's nose up against, and I'm free to admit I was pretty near cryin', what with one thing and another, when all of a sudden I turned me head, lyin' there, an' mighty near chucked a fit on the spot.

There was a little man standin' in the middle of the fo'c's'le floor, lookin' at me, and I didn't need to be told twice who he was. It was the same little cuss that had run into me in Havana—beard, white face, and all. But now I could see him a whole lot clearer, because he was in the light. Kind of a glimmer, it was, comin' from Lord knows where, and I didn't inquire just then, but it made him stand out against the dark like a banana in a coal-cellar.

"Ker-rimes!" I says.

He don't say nothin' at all, only comes movin' forward, and I could see his eyes glitterin' under his shaggy eyebrows. Middle-aged

little chap, or more—he'd gray in his hair an' beard, I saw—an' dressed in some kind of outlandish kit I'd not run across the like of previous.

He give me the shivers, all at once. Didn't look nach'ral to me . . .

An' then, by the Lord, I'd somethin' else to chew on. He knelt by me an' began unt'y'n' the lashin's the Swede had fixed up. A proper seaman he was, at that—there was nothin' in them knots that stopped him, no for a minute. But so help me Susannah, the flesh on me began to creep, an' the hair stood up on the nape o' my neck, because I couldn't feel no fingers.

When whoever-it-was had done loosenin' me, he stood back.

"Rise, *señor!*" he said in that queer, sing-song voice of his. "There is mutiny here, no?"

"Looks damned like it!" I said. "But—'oo are you, an' what are you doin' here?"

He made a kind of a wash-out movement with one hand, as if he was shovin' me aside.

"Mutiny, hah?" he said under his breath, and then went off into a string of Spanish firewords that sounded like tearin' calico. "Mutiny! It seems, *Señor Inghs*, that I have seen some such matter before. Come!"

BELIEVE IT or not, that little feller was spittin' like a cat

with pure temper, and there was somethin' about him that had me on me feet right away. You know how it is—there's some men it don't do to shilly-shally with. Well, this cove was one of them; yes, he was one of them.

So I followed him to the door, an' together we peered out aft, along the *Blackstone's* decks. What we saw didn't improve my state o' mind none, I'm tellin you.

The moon was up now, and from where we were the bridge was visible, clear as day. There were a dozen of 'em on it, in and out o' the chartroom, mighty busy with some monkey-work or other of their own. In a wing of the bridge, pushed against the outside edge of it, I could see a couple o' figures that were old Wayne, unless I was mistook, an' Todd, the second officer. Morgan the first, wasn't there, nor the bos'n neither, and it didn't need more'n a couple o' guesses to figure out what'd probably happened to them, pore fellers.

A couple o' the mutineers was holdin' Wayne and Todd where they was with pistols. You could see 'em plain.

"Hah-h!" says the little chap again, a kind o' hiss like a snake.

And then he stops, sudden. Another pair o' the beauties up there have come tumblin' down the ladder, hurryin' forward. It's me they're after, o' course—one of

'em's Lundborg, by the size of him. I pull back into the shadow, and the little man grunts.

"So!" he says.

With that, here's somethin' slid into me hand—about two foot or so of an iron bar they used for leverin' hatches.

I hefted it, there in the shadow, and His Nibs grinned at me right across his queer, nutcracker mug. Then he—well, he went away, if that's what it was. At any rate, he wasn't there any more. I waited for Lundborg and Co. stelin' more than a little sick, I do assure you.

Right along they came, and I could hear Lundborg growlin' in that hoarse, animal fashion of his. The other man with him says somethin', and Lundborg laughs.

"Oho!" says he. "Dot will be all right, do nodt worry. He does as he is toldt, or else ... " *Whack!*

Right as he passed me I got him—plunk on the skull, with a noise I can hear yet, like breakin' eggshells. Down he went, limp as a dead dog, an' by the time Number Two'd made up his mind somthin' was happenin', I'd give him what stopped him thinkin' for a bit, too.

"Aha!" says Kiss-Me Quick, right at me elbow, an' where he'd come from mebbe you know, for I don't. "It is so we deal with dogs, eh, *Señor Ingles?*"

"Yes," I says, pickin' up Lundborg's gun. "An' now we'll just have a look at some o' the other

dogs, mister, an' see if there's a yap or so left in them still. Come on!"

I'D GIVEN OVER wonderin' who he was or what he was. All I wanted was to get at that bridge, single-handed, or with him as me sidekick, an' blow hell out of Marks and his bunch. But no—the little feller wasn't havin' any. He looks at the pistol, curious.

"No," he said. "Not so, *amigo*—not yet. They are many to one, still, with such affairs. And there is also the captain and his mate—if these children of the devil are alarmed, they will certainly kill these. No, there is another way, *hijo mio!*"

Well, he was talking sense all right—and it's odd, but I'd lost that scare of him I had. I wasn't any nearer havin' a notion who he was or what he was doin', but I could talk back to him without swallowin'.

"Yes?" I says. "Let's hear it."

He poked his head out of the door again, and I took another squint. Things up there on the bridge was pretty much as they were, but naturally it wasn't goin' to be more than a brace o' shakes before Marks and Co. were askin' questions about Lundborg and me. Wayne and Todd were still huddled in the wing, cowed by the guns pulled on 'em.

"Go ahead!" I says to the little

man. "Your move, guv'nor!"

Well, at that he don't say nothin'—only stood there, tuggin' at that beard of his and frownin'. I could see him clearer now, though even that wasn't anything very clear. Kind of shimmery about the edges still, if you get what I mean. But there was enough of him to recognize again if I saw him.

Then he makes up his mind, an' out he goes on that deck, large as life, an' starts wilkin' straight for the bridge. The moon shone on him, or all round him, but you know the way things are in that kind o' light. It wasn't easy to be sure of anything, once he'd got ten yards away—but I could have took my oath he'd somethin' in his hand now somethin' long an' glitterin'.

"Here!" I says to meself. "This'll never do. Can't leave him to face that mob alone."

So out I goes, too, but you c'n just bet I'm not doin' any paradin' across the open deck like him. I don't mind ownin' I got down on me hands and knees, an' went belly-fashion, dodgin' from shadow to shadow. That bridge up there was too almighty high an' towerin' to please me.

There wasn't a roach could move on the foredeck without a man at that rail spottin' it.

But d'ye know somethin'? That crowd never saw the little feller

until he was actually goin' up the ladder! Why, I don't know, for there was a dozen of 'em in plain sight on the bridge there; but none of 'em seemed to look forward at all, until Marks comes to the rail. I reckon he was gettin' curious about Lundborg.

Well, he sees the little chap, not a dozen feet from him.

"Gawd!" he yells sudden. "'Oo the 'ell's this . . ."

AN' WITH THAT up with his *bandook* an' lets go, once, twice, an' then again. Seemin'ly he missed — anyway the bullets come smack-thud into the deck, quite close enough to me to be comfortable, I pass you me word. An' there's a yell from Marks, callin' on his Maker, an' all manner o' things, an' then a chokin' cry. Somethin' comes pitchin' an' tumblin' down the ladder an' lies at the bottom, makin' a queer gurglin' noise, an' twitchin'. It's friend Marks, an' he's been stuck in the throat, same's you'd stick a pig.

"Judas!" I says. "That's goin' it pretty strong . . ."

Well, it was, but there wasn't any time to think o' such matters. You never heard such a perishin' hubbub as what's broke loose on the bridge there. Shots, shouts, curses, an' the tramplin' of feet, an' then screams. By jiminy, screams!

I went up that ladder three steps at a time, the pistol cocked in me fist, an' me heart hammerin' at me ribs like a sledge. Gawd knows what I expected to see at the top — the devil and all his fry wouldn't have surprised me. But when I put foot on the bridge, it was mostly over.

Down the rear ladder, helter-skelter, pell-mell, fallin' over one another in a torrent, went what was left o' the mutiny.

Judgin' by the sounds they was makin', somthin' had put it in their silly heads that what they'd been up to didn't pay, for they was howlin' for mercy an' forgiveness an' everything else under the sun, fit to bust.

Old Wayne had come totterin' out of the wing, and his face was like ashes.

"Why, what the — Who the . . ." he was stammerin', and not gettin' much further than that. But Todd the Second had more guts, a bit. He glares at me.

"Drop that gun!" says he. "Drop it, I say!"

Thinkin', o' course, I was one o' the mob meself.

I stooped down an' picked up another, that one o' the others had chucked away.

"Here, sir!" I says. "Beggin' your pardon, but — come on!"

And with that I bolted for the after rail, an' leant over it.

"Stand fast, the lot of you!"

I called down to the gang below. "We're all armed up here, an' we're takin' no more from you. Stand fast an' drop any arms you've got! Slippery, now!"

Well, they did. For a nineteen-year-old boy, bluffin'—they stuck their hands up, an' the knives and such went clatterin' on the deck. Behind me Todd was pullin' himself together.

"Beg pardon, sir," says I, turnin' to him, "but maybe you'll take over now. It don't seem altogether suitable for me to handle, somehow . . ."

He stares at me, passin' a hand across his brow.

"Am I mad, Charteris," he says, "or are you?"

There's a bellerin' from down the engineroom, an' Taggart, the engineer, comes tumblin' on deck. He's a drunken old Scot as a rule, but now he's sober, an' full of fight.

"Bridge!" he roars. "Are ye all right up there? Oh, it's you, Muster

Todd. Well, an' what kind o' whigmaleerie's this, I'd be wishful to know?"

Todd interrupts. "Never mind that now," he says. "Let's get this gang under control, and then we'll talk. Charteris, you'd better lend a hand. You seem to be in charge of the situation—you and that other fellow. Who was he—and by the great hook-block, where is he?"

He'd gone—naturally. An' what's more nobody on board the *Blackstone* ever clapped eyes on him again. All the way across that short-handed, cramped passage to Cadiz here, we talked about him, mostly behind our hands and without lookin' at one another. There's things at sea like that, mister—always has been an' always will be—and it don't do to go shovin' inquiries too far, if you get me. No, by thunder it don't!

Well, I suppose you want to know 'oo this little Spaniard was, eh? Well, your guess is as good's mine. I don't believe in ghosts, but . . .

BAYOU TRAP

by HAPSBURG LIEBE

TIME: Not so long ago

PLACE: The Bayous

Steploe Jimerson knew the secrets of two men. If he could kill one, without leaving traces which that heller of a deputy, Lofe Sebring, could track down, then Steploe could get what he wanted from the other man.

HE LEFT THE road a quarter of a mile above the store, and soon afterward was crossing the dark, mysterious bayou on "Still Abe" Lassard's one-log bridge. An oil lamp gleamed inside the front window of the shack that was home to Lassard and his lone daughter. It meant, he knew, that some person other than Still Abe and Nanna was there. Instinctively he veered into the swampy

woodland, slipping along like a sinister shadow on his bare, half splay feet. Slim, axe-faced, under twenty-four but already with a scraggly beard, more weasel than human—this was Steploe Jimerson, hard-bitten spawn of the bayous.

He crept through a tangle of yellow-flowered wild jessamine and to a knothole in the front wall of the shack, peering through. Inside,



the gaunt and black-bearded Lassard sat glaring at Bink Holloway, a squat, dark, youngish man with a bullet-shaped head and the arms of a gorilla. Lassard's rifle lay across a chair nearby. On the floor to his left was a lantern, ready to be lighted, and beside it were his two 'coon-dogs. Within the hour, he and Lafe Sebring would set out for the lower swamp to hunt 'coons.

Holloway glared back at Still Abe in sullen, angry defiance. "You know what brung me here, Abe," he muttered.

The eyes of the older man smoldered. "You'll haf to wait fo' awhile, Bink," he said desperately.

"You jes' keep puttin' me off and puttin' me off, 'bout marryin'

Nanna. But I'll wait nary day longer," growled the visitor. Of a bolder breed than Jimerson, he was, but otherwise no better. He'd killed his man, this Holloway. That, however, was long before young Lafe Sebring's appointment as deputy sheriff.

Bink Holloway wheeled, his bare feet shaking the worn, scrubbed-white floor. There was a flash of blue in the lamplight—a distractingly pretty girl in a bluegingham dress—she came as though out of nowhere at all, and she followed Bink to the darkness of the ramshackle front porch.

Lassard bent his shaggy head. He did not even see his daughter pass.

Jimerson shrank back from the

knothole and into the vines, became a part of the velvet night. Holloway and Nanna stood so close to him that he might almost have put out a hand and touched them.

Nanna whispered fearsomely, "What is it you know on my pappy, Bink? You got to tell me now!"

Holloway told her, at last.

"Back in the summer when they wasn't no huntin' ner trappin' and yo' pappy was so hard run, he stole a bag o' cawmeal and a side o' fatback out o' Rane's sto'. Me and Step Jimereson seen him do it. You know yo'self how mean old Rane is. He'd send yo' pappy to jail, ef he knowed. And yo' pappy wouldn't deny it, nuther!"

"Bink!" tragically breathed the girl. "If he done that, he done it fo' me mo'n fo' hisself; and he done it mos'ly because that old skinflint, Rane, cheated him on some 'coon-hides the winter befo'. You sho'ly wouldn't be mean enough..."

"You see ef I an't!" Holloway cut in. "Well, are you goin' to marry me, or mus' I tell?"

Nanna shrank. "G' me ontel Sattidy," she begged. "Please!"

"We-ell, all right. I'll do that, honey."

The gorilla arms reached for her. But she slipped back inside, and a moment later was confronting her father.

LASSARD LOOKED UP, saw that she knew.

"What made you do sech a fool thing as that, pappy?" she demanded.

Still Abe frowned hard. "I tuck only as much from John Rane as he tuck from me in the hide deal last winter. And yit it was the wrong way. I can see that now, gosh knows. But it's too late."

"Yes," moaned the girl. "It'd tickle Rane to git to send somebody to jail. But Lefe Sebring..."

"Cain't help a bit. He respects his deputy oath, Nanna."

In the eye that Steptoe Jimereson had fixed to the knothole again, after Bink Holloway shuffled off, there was now a mocking leer. Hovering about his mouth was a mocking grin. He had come to the Lassard home for identically the same reason that had brought Holloway.

Jellous rage gripped Steptoe. He'd been afraid that Holloway would beat him to it.

He moved silently off toward the dark bayou, after Bink; and in Steptoe's right hand there was an open dirk knife. Then he decided that the knife entailed too great a risk. Deputy Lefe Sebring had the ability to trail a man like a bloodhound; and he could very nearly tell you the weight, height, and even the age of a man by his footprints. It was uncanny. Both

Jimerson and Holloway hated Lafe, because he was wont to smile long upon Nanna Lassard, whenever he saw her. There was small room for doubt that the girl reciprocated the young officer's tender feeling for her.

The weasel-like Jimerson crossed Still Abe's one-log bridge, stole up the bayou and to his own little bridge, crossed back, made his way under moss-draped cypresses and gums to the patchwork hut that he lived in alone. After having kindled a tiny fire in his cheap, castiron stove, he put coffee on to boil, then sat down to think. He would have to be extremely clever in this business of removing Bink Holloway from the path that to him was primrose. The smart deputy must not find a single clue; and he, Jimerson, must have a perfect alibi.

In the black treetops over the hut a slim-bodied swamp owl clacked incessantly, like a crazy duck. Steptoe did not hear it. Somewhere in the dark tangle of underbrush outside, too, a baby rabbit, caught in a pair of cruel jaws, gave its death cry. Steptoe didn't hear that, either.

Then—he had it. Bateaus—small, paddle-driven boats—left no trails. Lafe Sebring could look the bayou over until the break of doomsday, but he'd never find a footprint on the bayou water!

There would be little chance of his being seen, if he did his work very early in the day. The night's accumulation of fog would be a help, rather than a hindrance.

Steptoe grinned, crawled into the built-in bed and went off to sleep at once. The weird clacking of the owl was like a mournful lullaby.

THE BOLES of the trees that lined the low shores were barely distinguishable when he went paddling his little boat silently down the bayou, a sinister shape in the gray mists that shrouded the mirrorlike surface. No heron was awake as yet, no 'gator, no moccasin, no squirrel. The few frogs that mumbled sleepily merely ceased mumbling until after the shape had passed.

Just above Bink Holloway's single log bridge, in an elbow of the bayou, there was a deep, dark hole that the folk thereabouts called Twenty Fathom. A gnarled liveoak draped thickly with funereal-gray moss streamers leaned far out and low over this hole.

Steptoe Jimerson was careful that his bateau did not touch the bark of the tree as he stopped beside it. Across the leaning hole he balanced his old muzzle-loader duck gun, down in the vitals of which he had tamped a heavy charge of black powder, and eighteen buckshot.

"We'll see who gits Nanna Lassard," he kept telling himself. "She might' near promised to marry Bink Holloway. She likes me jes' 'bout as much as she likes Bink, and I know jes' as much on her pappy as Bink does. We'll see who gits Nanna!"

He moved the gun until its barrel was aimed at a point some five feet from the ground, near the inner end of the Holloway foot-log. From his pocket he took a spool of gray fishline. He passed the end of the line deftly around a branch behind the gunlock, fastened it to the trigger, pulled back the heavy old hammer. Then, with spool unwinding in the bottom of the bateau, he paddled himself—slowly, carefully—to the inner end of the log, and there got out. He drew the line just taut enough across the path, tied it to a clump of grass, cut away and pocketed the spool. Again, to his weasel eyes came the mocking leer, to his weasel mouth the mocking grin.

"We'll see who gits Nanna Lassard!" he muttered once more. "When Bink starts over the log and his foot hits the line—*blow!* And me, I'll be down at the sto' and have a fine alibi. And they'll be no footprints on the bayou!"

Painstakingly, he cut one and a half of the three tiny strands on the grass clump. It was a cunning arrangement. The recoil of the gun would throw it off balance back—

ward. It would fall into the deep, dark, hole. Sheer weight would break the fishline at the weakened point and drag the line also into the hole—leaving not a sign of this diabolical trap that Lafe Sebring or anybody else would be able to find!

The light of day was not yet full, by any means; and there was the fog. Jimereson, intent now upon hiding the line under wisps of dead grass, did not see Bink Holloway until Bink stood over him. Holloway had spent most of the night gambling at a lumber camp, and he was just coming home.

"Out early, Step, ain't you?" said Bink narrowly, dirk knife ready in his hand. For the man whom Bink had killed, he had also knifed. "Say, what's that string . . ."

He stooped to pick it up. Jimereson, his yellow soul shriveling in the grip of stark fear, wheeled to run. He was too late. The old duck gun bellowed. Eighteen buckshot whistled—buckshot well aimed, too—and up and down the bayou the hoarse thunder rolled and reverberated. Then all became still.

In neither of the two prostrate figures was there the movement of even the tiniest muscle. . .

When Deputy Lafe Sebring came back from 'coon-hunting with old Still Abe Lassard, he was unable to find a telltale footprint anywhere.

THE BLACK PEARL

by PAUL ANNIXTER

TIME: When the British still held empire

PLACE: India

It was a mystery to Jivan, still an infant as elephants go, how these little upright people made the great elephant people work at their will. And it was a mystery to the white rulers of the land how the natives knew each elephant from each other elephant, and considered themselves servants of the great elephant people. But Arjuna was a knower of mysteries, and he alone could command the heart of Jivan, the Black Pearl.

THAT DAY stood out from all the rest—strange voices that weakened the limbs and prevented him from carrying out ordinary intentions; the tramp of humans

in the great range of his home valleys and ridges; on all sides shouts and cries, so that only forward was there escape, and a deadly premonition about even

that. It was a day that did not die down into the past like others, but was carried forward like one's baggage to the future. — This was long before Jivan first heard his name from the lips of men and learned to know it as one set apart for him alone.

The elephant herd milled and massed together without dignity or grace. There was no water for cooling play, scarcely a snatched trunkful from the shallow ditches; no leisure for feeding among the canes. Instead, a feeling of blight and death closing in upon the gray, chosen people. Not one of them could help another; not one could keep either his dignity or those instincts which preserve the herd and promote group interests. The oldest sires and mammas lost their look of power, and even the hind legs of the canny old queen rocked and trembled in her dilemma.

In the midst of this was a ten-year-old infant without the first venerable wrinkle in his trunk, and with only two aching knobs hinting at the mighty tusks to be. How could such a one know what to do or which way to go, even a black pearl among elephants? He saw his mother humped against the close-packed drive. Her tail lifted, and his trunk twirled a half-hitch around it. He felt better with the old bond re-established—that is, until the panic that was hers

began to pour into him through the connection, so adding to his own.

The enemy was now visible—other elephants with small creatures on their heads and backs. At this moment a gray, waddling elder of his own people, hemming sideways in a limping rush, broke the tail-hold of the little black pearl. His mother's call did not reach him in that crazy noise. She was shunted out of the jam, while he was carried forward in it.

All this was now but a memory of long ago; but it was like an unclosed wound in the head, that hour when, at the end of the long drive, a hundred wild elephants, one of the last of the Vindha herds, were split into two companies, the one to break back into freedom, the other to be trapped, and later to learn toil.

The little bull had found himself in the midst of great trees, evenly broken and partly peeled and standing close together on all sides. The elephants forward came to a grunting stop, others packing in behind. Night came on, but there was no room in which to lie down; the broken trees stood thick and impassable. Outside that, a circle of red flowers thrust themselves upward continually, showing even through the dark of night.

THEY STOOD so tottery on their hind feet, these little crea-

tures who had captured him. They had such little countenances and seemed so unimportant. They balanced so uncertainly on their two feet. A constant query: How did they keep from falling? At first he thought their voices helped, that they kept from falling by constantly making sounds; but this was gradually disproved. A still greater wonder was that these little upright creatures made the great elephant people work at their will. The greater were captive to the lesser.

The Two Feet were of two kinds — those that wore dark outer skins over white underskins and those that wore white outer skins over dark. In each case the outer skins were removable. This was repeatedly proven when they entered the water to bathe, the outer skin being left upon the bank; a matter difficult to understand that these were not bathed too.

The first day he went without water or food, and he tugged at the chains that held him between two trees, until the red went out of his eyes and his heart succumbed to further resistance. He was then released and led back to the picket by one with a dark face whose throat was covered with black hair. He had no hate, no strength, no will to destroy the narrow body walking on two legs before him.

Another time, just as darkness fell, a very small creature of the

dark-faced people came close to the picket-lines and sat there looking up at him. Without moving his feet, the captive elephant swung his weight forward, looped his trunk softly about the small of the leg nearest him, and drew it in. The thing toppled like a rootless shrub, so easily; it was so helpless and light as to be a matter of endless amazement.

At this instant all voices changed to a quick hissing, then silence. The next moment there sounded a low moan from the dark people, such as one hears in a forest before the storm. All the while the small one lay still between Jivan's feet, neither scratching nor biting. The touch of him was so strange and foreign.

Now from amongst the Two Feet people came forward the one with hair-covered throat, bending his back and speaking strange, alluring sounds. The captive lifted his trunk to listen, the sounds vibrating to the very roots of his ears. Meanwhile, at his feet the little one arose and ran away. Then the moaning silence of the people broke into a confusion of noise.

JIVAN STUDIED long the bright red flowers first seen through the close-standing trees. Wherever the Two Feet tarried, there sprang these restless flowers that men called fire, pale by day and bright by night, standing out

from the darkness as no flowers he had ever seen before, and always unfolding with acrid gray veils. He could not long refrain from stirring the least of these with his trunk, but the bite of them was instant, and it withered as no other nettle he had ever touched, leaving a wound that did not heal for many days.

Now there was one among those of the white-faced people who had more voice and made more use of it than any other. Whenever this one bellowed, the others, both dark and light, came quickly to carry out his will.

Food lost its savor whenever this one moved along the lines of chain. One evening, at the time of sculing-dust, this one came near and stood, his back turned to Jivan. To the young elephant it seemed well to silence the clamor or that voice, for himself and for the sake of others. His trunk slid out as before, easily and soundlessly to draw the figure close; but lo! this one did not rest easily in his trunk, nor give himself in silence. Rather, instant screaming struggle, like that of a tree-cat, which brought every one running and shouting. Almost, the captive destroyed the last shred of play in the affair. Jivan jerked the body aloft, tempted to dash it to the ground. But under his lifted trunk another White Face stood, and out of the very palm of this one's

hand there spouted fire with a terrible sound.

Jivan's trunk loosened as he plunged back to the length of his chain, and the quiet that followed he became aware of a stinging, fiery hole in his shoulder. A streak of the painful lightning of the red flower had bitten him from the hand that rose before his face. His head was full of wild anger—then cold nothingness, as on the day when he had struggled between the trees until his heart broke within him.

That was not all, however. He was presently led forth between two gray elephants and beaten with chains by a lean old tusker with a twisted head; a thudding and hammering of chains upon his back and ribs, when already he was lamed and bleeding from the hole in his shoulder. They beat him until he fell on his side and groaned, and it was all past finding out. One thing it was to play with a dark face, but quite another to clutch at the leg of one with a white under-skin. There was much to choose between these two kinds of creatures of different smells, and there was no longer a question in Jivan's mind as to which was the more desirable and to be trusted.

"HE IS NOT an evil one," mourned Ram Prasad, master of the *mahouts* of the great government stockade at Hurda. "Did he

not answer to my voice intoning the *mantram*—he that hardly yet knows his own name? Did he not return to me safely and without bruise the small son of my son, who lay so wisely still beneath his feet?"

"But why did his trunk steal out like a python's head and loop the ankle of Foster-Sahib, of all men most dangerous in his wrath?" inquired Hamilla Khan, an elder among the *mahouts*.

"It was a form of play, no more—as a child reaches forth to grasp that which is forbidden. He is of the royalty among elephants, that little one—not common like the gray captives delivered to us with him. He is of the original old Iranian type. They were more nearly perfect, with deeper founts of life and deeper sources of wisdom than the common elephants. A great wrong has already been done. The shot of the Lieutenant-Sahib was not necessary; the struggle of Foster-Sahib to escape was unwise.—But of all, the beating with chains afterward was the darkest evil."

The younger *mahouts* moved in closer. They had finished their evening meal, though the elephants were still feeding.

"As the black panther is most difficult of all animals to train, so the black elephant is hardest for men to subdue, even to understand," observed Beela Singh.

Ram Prasad did not let such words pass without comment. "It is because the heart of the Black Pearl is not once and for all broken in the discipline of a few weeks, like the gray elephants taken from the jungle. The love of such a one is greater, and the corresponding hatred, if he is foully dealt with, is also greater and more terrible. This one with tusks just showing, and not yet able to answer to his name in the confusion of the picket lines—did he not respond to the *mantram* spoken in our extremity, and give back the life of the child? So would it have been with Foster-Sahib, had he remained quiet until I came."

"But there is not always at hand one gifted in the *ada-adapadaku*," mused Beela Singh. Silence followed his casual repetition of syllables sacred to the elephant cult. He added after a moment, "Besides, the English are not learned in these matters . . ."

"No, they are no so learned," softly mourned Ram Prasad. "In a few years among us, they think they can put to use the knowledges of our blood, knowledge that we have learned from our father's fathers. Yet it is proven that they do not know one elephant from another. They have not seen in the young Jivan anything different from the other captives, even though the oldest of the gray elephants in government service turns

to him as one set apart. Nor have they recognized that other Black Pearl of Persia that was taken with him . . ."

"The old mother-thing—the dying one?" inquired Hamilla Khan, though he knew very well.

"The same," said Ram Prasad. "The English do not treat her differently from other captives, but all elephants see her as a queen in her own right; and they see Jivan as a prince among the Vindhya elephants. We, the servants of the elephant people, are powerless to restore either the one or the other to rightful place. As for the dying of the old queen, you have truly spoken, my brother; but she is as a great tree that is dying. Many years may still pass before grief consumes her to the fall.—Slip quietly down the lines of chain, my son, and see if the child Arjuna is still in his place at the feet of Jivan."

The grown son of Ram Prasad arose from the left hand of his father and vanished in the darkness. After a moment he returned, eyes agleam.

"There he sits as usual, just out of reach of the stretch of chain. Thus they face each other in the darkness, communing together."

The master *mahout* spoke again. "If the young Prince Jivan is not ruined—if his confidence is ever restored—much of the credit will rest on the shoulders of this

small one of our house.—Great is the love that passes through the channels of so small a body!"

The grown son of Ram Prasad then spoke. "Even now, had I not forbidden it, and had I not impressed upon him so thoroughly the consequences of his disobedience, little Arjuna would take his seat inside the circle of Jivan's chain. But the fears of the child's mother, of course, are to be considered."

IN THE MONTHS that followed, Jivan was not free to come and go, like many of the others. Though he knew most of the sounds made by the *mahouts*, he was not trusted among the favored elephants. Always his loads were stiffer, heavier; he traveled with the least-knowing. And though the Dark Faces gave him grace and understanding, the white ones did not, and his lot continued bitter through the years, because of the mistakes of his first days.

He did not know the reason for all this—this constant harden-bearing and frequent punishment. He saw the great swarms of mankind in their stinking hives, and out on the drill fields, the straight lines of humans, all of one color and harness, all rising and turning and stopping at the same time. Sometimes there was anger, and always there was grief in his heart, a low boiling of grief like a pot

that never is silent and never goes dry. That which simmered continually in the pot was a longing for the old freedom, for the old ranges and the great rains, for the tender fresh foods and cooling streams, for his own kind, and for the delights of endless roaming after freedom.

There was one who shared the grief with him, and understood. This was the one grown from a child to a man among men within the span of Jivan's captivity. A thousand nights the heads of these two had been together, the young *mahout*, Arjuna, whispering the *mantram* of the elephant cult with which Ram Prasad had once saved his life; cloaking the syllables with the humming M's of the *liam*, after the manner of the old master. Then Arjuna would add to his whisperings, "Jivan, Jivan—Jivan-mukta."

One night, returning from a long journey to distant cantonments, Arjuna learned that the old queen still lived, and with Jivan following, led the way to her pen at the far end of the stockade.

They stood before the old Iranian, a rickety hone-hag now, of no use either to elephants or men, yet that became a moment to Arjuna lifted above all others.

Two elephants of the lordly lineage that had made up the armies of Cyrus of Persia; one dying, and one not yet come to his full

strength—touching trunks in a moment of silence.

Then Arjuna felt his heart filling, a pitcher long empty and now brimming with warmth and light. At that moment these two were not animals. The vast, dark prisons of their bodies softly opened invisible doors for him; the tired odor of the old one's failing body, which had met him as he approached, was brushed away in the cool night wind, and something of the brightness of her eminence among her own kind took its place. Her trunk lifted, curled about his dusty turban and lifted it clear in one piece; it wound itself then about his bare head, taking the place of the turban, lingering there a moment.

Jivan, his trunk lifted, stood still as bronze until that ceremony was over. It was but a matter of seconds, and Arjuna found himself one of the silent triangle again, his crumpled turban cloth under his arm, where she had thrust it before the accolade.

That it should not fall to the ground, he thought.

He glanced around. No one was near.

HE TOLD NO one of what had happened. There was none to understand except his grandfather, Ram Prasad, now so very old.

That night Arjuna thought it all

over again and again, even to the strange impulse that had prevailed upon him at nightfall to take Jivan to see the old one. He felt as one who has been initiated into an inner arcanum. Many evenings afterward an opportunity came to speak to Ram Prasad of a matter long dear to his mind.

"It is—it is that I would bring Jivan into his real place, sire," he explained. "I have reason to know that he is not doing well as one of the common porters of the string. I have spent much time with him. I should like to bring him gradually to his own place. The new Wentworth-Sahib is not a violent or even unreasonable man, by any seeming . . ."

"The new Wentworth-Sahib has not been fully tried," said Ram Prasad, pausing to draw his smoke in silence from the softly bubbling water pipe before his knees. "So you would like Jivan as your first charge, and you want to put yourself on his head instead of much ammunition and piled forage on his back?"

"Yes."

Ram Prasad demurred at length, in part whimsically, but he ended by saying, "We shall see what we shall see."

Arjuna gained his point. Thereafter he rode on the head of the black Persian, and knew the joy of sitting a racing elephant; but also the slow, grinding friction of pack

travel seemed by contrast contemptible as never before. Thereafter he was in danger of scorning the gray porters of the military herd, forever traveling from contonment to contonment, up Bombay side and down Calcutta side. He was not liked any too well for having this splendor among elephants as his personal charge. Men who spend their lives among certain animals know the terrible joy of such a possession. It was as if one, and one of the youngest, were given an English thoroughbred or a pure Arabian, in the midst of pack riders accustomed to mules.

It was true that Arjuna and Jivan worked well with each other. "Their heads were together," as the Himalayan men say of two having understanding. It was true that none other could have kept the high-toned Jivan "on the way and out of the way," describing the work of a messenger in the troupe, miles long; one that moves twice as many miles in a day as the other, without disturbance or entanglement. True also that Jivan would have gone back to the portorage, had it not been for Arjuna, this "favorite of Ram Prasad."

The two gave little attention to what others said. They were bound in each other for a period of happiness. After a dozen miserable years, each had come into his own

place, finding themselves together there. Day by day now, they were put to full use; limitations were removed, and they found ripe chances to show what they were made of. Neither could ask more, and each believed the attainment permanent. Only the very old and wise, like Ram Prasad, knew that of all illusions, that of seeming arrival towers above the rest.

THE YOUNG WOMAN Amana, daughter of Beela Singh, was innocently at the base of the trouble that presently arose. Amana was of an age and appearance to draw men's thoughts. Arjuna had looked upon her many times since a child, but never with quite the focalized attention of the last tarrying at Hurda. After a long itinerary, the elephant train had now reached the Nerbudda again; the last night halt but one from the home stockade.

Among the *mahouts* was a young Nepalese named Srong Tebdoo, whose thoughts were also of Amana, who was waiting in Hurda, and this night it became dear to him, after drinking much arrack, that she could be waiting only for himself, and that Arjuna should be informed of this without delay. So dear did this appear to Srong Tebdoo that he marveled he had not seen it so from the beginning. Meanwhile, not finding Arjuna in camp or at the picket-

lines, he made his way to the river bank, where 'The Two', as Arjuna and his great four-footed charge were now called, stood together in the gathering darkness, having bathed—even scoured from toe to ear—in the cool waters.

The Nepalese, bracing himself with one hand on Arjuna's shoulder, unburdened the thoughts that had come to him; but they were coolly received. In fact he was told that the matter of choice lay with Amana only; meanwhile, that sleep was the best antidote for one so deluded. Srong Tebdoo was angered, and presently there was no dealing with him other than by running away, a thing not possible with Jivan standing by.

A sudden premonition of fear seized Arjuna. He struck the Nepalese to bring him to his senses, but a struggle followed instead, and the two men fell to the ground together. The worst was then realized when Arjuna felt the blank trunk of Jivan worming between them. His single pleading cry to the elephant was without avail. What he saw then, as clearly as if it were not night, was the face of the Nepalese, a thick black collar closed about his neck. The body of Srong Tebdoo lifted from him, swung over the elephant's head as a hat is hurled, and looped through the darkness into the river. Not a sound followed the splash.

No answer came to Arjuna's frantic calling on the bank; the sluggish, sleepy stream was unbroken by an emerging head. Arjuna plunged in, swimming under water and feeling among the reeds and rocks. He came up to breathe, and dived again and again, until his fingers at last closed upon the body, neither on top nor at the bottom. He struggled to the bank, dragging a burden limp as a sack of dead leaves.

Others had come with torches. Questions followed. Arjuna, hoarse from exertion, moved to the head of Jivan, who stood calmly, but for an icy spark in either eye. In the torchlight, he saw the bruised wet face of Srong Tebdoo, and he thanked Krishna that the Black Pearl could not speak.

"I struck him for what he said," Arjuna repeated. "He fell into the water. I watched for him to rise and he did not. I went in after him—but it was long, too long . . ."

Many voices rose now. Ram Prasad came and asked questions. The old eyes shone with the grief of a dying man when he heard. Wentworth-Sahib came, and he also questioned.

"And what did you strike him with?" he asked.

"My hand. See the mark, Sahib."

"Why did you strike him?"

"For what he said."

"It was about a woman, Sahib, and Srong Tebdoo was not himself," explained Ram Prasad.

They were lifting the body. Arjuna's eyes distended at the sight of the head, lopping loosely back. He strove to crush the thought from his mind, so that it would not touch other minds and make them look too closely.

Jivan suffered himself to be led back to the stockade by Ram Prasad. Arjuna was taken in another direction. The English adjudged that he had caused the death of Srong Tebdoo, but without murderous intent. He was sent to Poona for seven years. What the Indian *unhunts* surmised they kept to themselves. So far as Arjuna heard afterward, he was the only one who saw Srong Tebdoo's neck, as a thing broken without a mark; and he was also the only one who knew that Jivan was among those elephants who had killed their man.

JIVAN WAS very patient when Arjuna was taken away. An elephant is not a dog to mourn himself to death in a week; he bides his time and lives upon his love, as one lives upon the fat of his body during a long fast. Only when others would have forgotten or found peace has the elephant exhausted his power of waiting. It was not until months later, after the

great round of the cantonments had been made again and still there was no Arjuna waiting for him in Hurda, that Jivan refused his burdens one morning after his ankle-chains had been loosed. Cannily, he wove through all obstructions until he reached the open country.

No good going to the places where men swarmed, in search of his lost love; had he not been to all of them? Gradually gaining speed, he entered the monkey forest beyond Hurda, crossed the Ner-budda, and left all man-sounds behind. He sank into the Grass Jungle as the monsoon struck, and gradually made his way higher and higher toward his old ranges, now in the dim glory of the great showers.

This was what he had longed for through all the early years of captivity—return to the old high ranges; nights of brooding in just such dripping splendor as this; the sense of freedom and aloneness. The thirst dreams of the long marches were now but a memory; but it was nothing without the man. Everywhere he listened and winnowed the air for that one, his body a great pot again, simmering with grief. More and more, as the weeks passed, the wild state renewed itself within him; it became less possible for him to approach the villages, and the smell of burning wood awakened the old dread of his earliest captivity.

Back to his birthplace at last, the high forests of memory closing about him, but with an emptiness within him that was harder to bear than any strangeness. Other animals were there; striped and spotted ones coughing and snarling in deep shadow; the silent, sliding creatures of the underwood; the noisy, broken-brained people of the trees. These last he saw differently now, and with a deep, restless distrust. Of all jungle creatures, they were the most upstanding, like the Two Feet.

All was different now; he was never taken for granted as before. It was as if he carried some warning taint of captivity wherever he went. Higher and farther into the great Terai Forest he climbed.

Almost when he had ceased to search for them, Jivan's trailing trunk one day picked up the scent of his own kind. He followed on along a broken trail that only the chosen ones could have trampled. More swiftly then, all lightness again, and trumpeting at the last, he came up with a wheeling, milling company of gray *bathi*. There were many of them, but they were thin and small and dense-eyed. In all his files of remembrance there was nothing like this—unlike the elephants he had parted from on that long-ago day, these seemed to him wizened and witless. No dignity or sense of power was among them—no deep knowledge or herd

understanding. Something they had lost—or something he had put on—had broken the old connection between them.

For a week he followed in the wake of the herd, but gradually it became clear that there was no rest for him, even among the farthest summits; that this was not the old wild life of which he had dreamed, but a driven and hunted life, never resting. In these remnants of his people there was not the power to replace what he had known. Wild freedom was really less than the life of labor; now that he had it again, it had given him a deeper longing than he had ever known, not only for the Man, but for the ways of men. Even the great, dusty journeyings with the packs called to him once more. There was law and order there; a moving purpose to the days; an exchange of hard-earned intelligence from mind to mind; that made desolate this return to a company that had never known the yoke.

He was slow to realize; he suffered long before he understood that it was the life of the enemy itself that he longed for; that there was something in captivity greater than the thing that had called him back to the wild.

ARJUNA DID NOT return to the government service. He might have been taken back, but

he did not try. Ram Prasad was dead. His father would have worked for his reinstatement, but these two had never met in full understanding. Amana was dead to him, too. She was now living in the house of another, and her children about her. Lastly, Jivan was away; he was an outlaw, and the word "Missing" was posted against his name in the government books.

Sometimes Arjuna had to stop and think in order to recall that it was not he who had killed Srong Tehdoo, so deeply had he swallowed the truth and so constantly was he judged in the minds of men. Once, in the prison at Poona, a holy man had paused before him, searching his face intently. Then he reached for Arjuna's right hand, and looking close, he laughed.

"Why do you say you have killed?" he asked.

Strangely, it was easier after that.

Free at last, Arjuna turned to the Vindhya Hills, knowing instinctively that Jivan would make for his own habitat. He was not long in learning that the government was still hunting wild elephants in the farther ranges. Many weeks he traveled, inquiring, drawn by the same empty yearning Jivan had known. At length he came to an abandoned trap stockade. It was not old—not more than a year or two—but it had never been used. Something had frustrated the ele-

phant drive it had been built for, and it had been abandoned.

Coming up with the elephant hunters was no simple thing. The one great herd they were following, it was said, was made up of the remnants of many herds gathered together under the leadership of a long-headed female in whom knowledge and experience had become pure guile. Three government expeditions had tried for her; three great stockades had been constructed, with the herd under surveillance and all upper passes through the mountains blocked and the great noose tightening below. All these preparations by skilled elephant catchers had ended in failure because of a super-craft on the part of this leader who seemed no less than inspired. This year, the hill people told him, a fourth expedition was under Curtis-Farnall-Sahib of the Punjab, a very angry and determined man.

Often Arjuna hungered as he threaded the forest paths. A white man would have succumbed to the privations which he endured among the lesser peaks. Sometimes it was a band of monks that took him in, sometimes a woman or child of a hill village, thinking him an aspirant to holiness, until at last he reached an outlying *shakari* camp stationed at a distance from the great trap. As a wandering hillman, he was accepted among them, and there

was always a place for him around the evening fire.

He was none too soon for the final drive. The herd was already hemmed in, it was said; but so far it was neither restless nor suspicious. The advantage this year was that it had been come upon within range of a stockade already built, so that the perils of driving great distances and of the sounds of bulging could be avoided. As a stranger knowing his place, Arjuna would have said nothing, but it was repeatedly borne in upon him that time was short. Also, there was confusion in his mind over the talk concerning the leadership of the wild herd. A tusker called the Black was spoken of repeatedly.

"But I have heard that it was a great female that proved so resourceful in past seasons," he finally said.

A low crackle of laughter sounded round the fire.

"That is but foolish talk of the lower villages," said a voice.

"There is a female, however," said another, in piping tones that indicated he contained much knowledge on the subject.

ARJUNA WAITED and listened.

"Oh, yes, there is a great female among them even now," was further added.

"One that will prove a match

for the wild lord of the herd . . . "

"Do not make mystery further," said Gunarra Singh, the head of the band or *shikaris*. "It is no secret that the leader of the free elephants is not a female. So it was supposed until last year, because of the skill and cunning of the two former escapes. But last year, with my own eyes I saw the leader, a *kash bhanna*—tusk—of mighty presence, yet not old. This year, Curtis-Farnall-Sahib has come bringing no less than the Rani herself the greatest of the female enticers from the Punjab, to entoil this leader and bring him in.—Already, at this moment she is running with the wild herd."

"And in case the leader is not too entailed by the Rani," Arjuna suggested.

"It is in the plan that nothing be forgotten this time, in order that failure may be avoided. If the present leader stands out against the Rani he will be sacrificed before the final drive," said Gunarra Singh.

The network of beaters was further closed next morning, and still the wild herd showed no sign of rout. This tallied with former experience, however. In each case the hunters had believed all was over but the springing of the trap, only to find that the leader had side-stepped, with the hurtling strength of the herd behind him. Apparently he had waited to locate the portal

of the stockade before charging in the opposite direction.

Notwithstanding, in the camp of Gunarra Singh, as in all other strands of the great network, a subtle exhilaration was felt this day. Scouts reported that the Black and the Rani were moving together in amity; later, that the black tusker was actually enamored of the other. It was certain that the English wanted to save him if possible. He was on the younger side of maturity, of amazing size and beauty, a sensation for the Durbar—a priceless gift of government for some uneasy Maharaja in time of need.

AT THE END of the day, maners did not stand so well; the wild herd was now in two companies, almost equal, one with the Rani, the other standing by the male. Both sections were milling and had ceased to feed. If the decision had been made at the English headquarters, news of it had not yet reached the camp of Gunarra Singh. The final drive would be signalled at dawn or before, but as yet those in Gunarra Singh's camp did not know whether the Black was to be destroyed at the outset of the drive or given a chance to swing in with the Rani.

Arjuna did not wait for this decision to reach the camp of Gunarra Singh. At the hour of full

darkness he left his post, marked by a fire laid and ready to light at an instant's notice, and entered the cordon making for a point where his eyes had actually rested upon Jivan in the long shadows of afternoon. The hunters were taking no chances tonight. In all the great circle not a fire showed.

Of his own danger in approaching a wild herd already in a state of fiery unrest, Arjuna scarcely thought. He had little faith that Jivan could be wheedled by the decoy elephant. In the pandemonium of fire and shots and shouts, he was sure that the great Iranian would break for freedom instead of for the trap. This would mean his death from the heavy-bored elephant guns of the hunters. Accordingly, the purpose, at any cost, was to get Jivan out of the circle—alone if possible—before the signal for the drive. In the whole circle the best chance for this was at the point just left, the post which Arjuna was supposed to be holding near the prepared tinder-sticks. First of all, however, he must come up with Jivan; for upon the nature of this meeting all else depended.

Out of law with white men and dark tonight—a fact which the solitary hastening figure did not miss. More than the killing of a fellow *mahout*, this—yet there was no choice—He smelled the dust. He was crossing trampled ground.

There was no moon; he shifted gradually, feeling for the night-wind, to keep it always against him. The herd, divided at sundown, might have drawn together since then. All was silence, from hunters and hunted, until the squeal of a baby elephant sounded from the lower ground ahead, muffled in the trees by the stream . . .

There was the danger that one might approach too near, risking a stampede or a charge; or that one might halt too soon, still within hearing of the *shikaris*. Arjuna at last rose to his knees from a hummock, softly intoning the elephant *mantram* learned long ago from Ram Prasad.

"*Adi, adupadaka, aṭman . . .*" ending in the deep bee-hummed M's of the *Aum*.

Feeble and unconvincing it sounded compared to the full-throated sureness of Ram Prasad's voice. Still Arjuna could not send the call louder, lest the *shikaris* hear. He moved closer to the herd and tried again, adding the elephant's name, "Jivan—Jivan-mukta!"

THE WALL OF night deepened before him, a portal of denser black in the dark itself. He heard the soft, rolling beat of great pads; then the figure loomed. Now he was whispering brokenly. Upon his shoulder there was a tap as light as that of a woman's hand;

a trailing of the moist, sentient trunk tip across his cheek. Then the black spiral of the trunk lifted to the hazy stars, a windy note of exultation sounding, almost above the human register.

"Softly, my lord—softly, Jivan . . . No, not now! I will not be put up!"

The lower sweep of the trunk had bent his knees from behind, the thick nasal curve pressed against his cheek. But Arjuna pushed it away.

"No, Jivan, it is to follow *me* now. Come—and follow very softly!"

He had turned his back, returning the way he had come, Jivan's trunk nudging his neck and thighs and hips, still in the zest of greeting and remembrance. None of the elephants seemed to be following, but back from the stockade there now sounded the high-pitched siren of a female—Rani, doubtless aware that something untoward was on foot, and bent upon her life business.

With sinking heart Arjuna halted. He was not far from the post he had left, but the *shikaris* could not miss the trumpeting of the great decoy. Even now there were low voices and the stirring of human figures. The pallid movement of a white robe showed ahead—the only way out was closed! Then the cry of alarm no longer hesitant—sounded gongs and ham-

merings of shields; shots and shoutings, fires spring to life on all sides.

With events after that the man had nothing to do. At the flash of the fire ahead, Jivan had spiraled him aloft in a single sweep of the trunk, setting him down none too softly on the flat dome of the head, a great ear lifting to steady him on either side. Arjuna would have urged through the now animate circle at the nearest point but Jivan had wheeled and was running back to his own people.

That was the worst. With every passing second, there was less chance to break through on the farther side; yet Jivan was bent on gathering his people for a break, so frustrating not only the season's work of the English but destroying himself as well. Worse than imprisonment—worse than mere death . . .

The trunk lifted high before Arjuna's face, and a signal blasted from it. Then they were in the herd, a seething mass of tons of frantic wild flesh—the man with limbs drawn under him like a figure of Buddha, eyes and nostrils already sealed with dust, waiting for the end in fascination—Jivan's, his own. Yet after years there had been that meeting, long dreamed of.

"Let the end come swiftly!" he murmured fearlessly.

He felt the swerve, the tighten-

ing crush of the great bodies on either side, then a jamming halt, and the wrenching of wooden walls ahead as the creatures pressed against them. Not to death or freedom—Jivan had carried him to sanctuary within the portal of the stockade, the herd about him.

The hunters, roaring in the dawn, saw not only the Rani and the herd in the enclosure, but the Black Pearl as well, and upon the dome of that incorrigible, was a gaunt and bearded human figure, head bowed.

"IT IS THAT I knew him, Sahib—that he was not always of the wild, but of the Hurda service in my time. He as most highly held by government, in the days of Wentworth-Sahib . . ."

So Arjuna explained it, when Curtis-Farnall was called. The Englishman questioned and questioned. Though his gray eyes gleamed and sparkled alternately, his manner became ever more calm, after the manner of the English.

"And what did you say was

your idea in entering the herd in the night?"

"To keep him from the guns, *sahib*. It was my thought that at the last moment he would break forth as before—and he is my greatest friend."

"And you say he knew you in that jam, at night, and after years? He put you up—let you guide him into captivity?"

"It was rather—that he guided me, *sahib*!"

"It's incredible! If it wasn't, I wouldn't like it half so well."

The Englishman turned to his aides. Laughing grimly, he spoke again.

"The more I have to do with My Lord the Elephant, and with humans like this who belong to him for life, the less I know of the whole Indian question . . ."

Which showed that Curtis-Farnall was of the enlightened among the servants of Empire, and explained why he thereafter bestowed such long unaccustomed honor and respect upon Arjuna and his Black Pearl.



SPURS IN THE DUST

by GEORGE ROSENBERG

TIME: When rustlers roomed the range

PLACE: The Old West

Mr. Colt's invention made a good little man the equal of a good big man—but when the little man didn't have a gun, he had to fall back on a different sort of equalizer. Like Jimmy Rhodes, alone on the desert with the formidable rustler, Steve Fenton, a prisoner, forced to guide the outlaw to safety—and to Rhodes's own death the moment he'd fulfilled his assignment.

"SHERIFF, you say this Steve Fenton stampeded your posse thisaway when he was *asleep*. You all are lucky you didn't bust in on him when he was plumb awake!"

Jimmy Rhodes, horse wrangler for the Bar M, was speaking. He, Sheriff Doty, and two punchers were playing stud on the bunk-house table. Half a dozen other

riders were looking on. One was wearing a blood-stained bandana about his head. And another waddy was lying very still in a bunk, his face twisted with pain.

"That rustler," Sheriff Doty said gravely, "is the hardest case I've banged up ag'inst in fifteen years of herdin' hellhounds. We'll get him tonight, though. Soon's it's dark, we'll lay for him."

Doty glanced out of the open doorway. The desert still quivered with the heat of a California day. Over that waste of sage and sand and writhing cactus, the setting sun flung streamers of hot color. Far westward, a barren mountain wall glowed purple against a golden sky.

"It'll be dark in twenty minutes," Jimmy observed. "Sheriff, you ain't said what Fenton's done this time."

"He shot a waddy in Sweetwater," Doty explained, "an' high-tailed it with a U L hoss. We trailed him to camp this mornin' at Fig Tree Well. Lyin' asleep he was. So we jumped him. But I'm blasted if he didn't wake up a-shootin'! He plugged Tom an' Burt, knocked me cold with a gun barrel, an' evaporated. He's wilder'n a sack full of bobcats, that hombre!"

Jimmy spoke to the dealer before turning to Doty again.

"Another card, Pete. Sheriff, looks to me like you all walked into a trap."

"Why, you carrot-topped little he-bantam!" Doty burst out. "Maybe *you'd* have done better?"

Jimmy Rhodes *was* red-headed. And he *was* short. His fiery thatch of hair was only five feet, three inches above his boot toes. Nevertheless, his wiry frame was tough as raw moose hide; and he was just about as timid as a rampaging grizzly.

The first work he ever learned was "hoss". He learned it in English, Spanish, and Cahuilla Indian. He could ride anything from a wild-eyed mustang fresh from mesa grass, to rodeo man-killers. Topping off bronses at the Bar M was no tea-lapping pastime. But no rough 'un ever jarred the sunny grin off his lips.

As he eyed the sheriff now, he smiled good-naturedly. "Just when did you say you'd catch this rustler?"

Doty banged fist on the table to emphasize his words.

"Tonight! We found his hoss with a leg broke in a coulee near here. Fenton's holed up somewhere on this ranch."

"Y'see, he's goin' to try an' cross the desert. But he's no desert man. He don't know a *palo verde* from a niggerhead. Exceptin' right here, he can't get no bronc, no water, no nothin'! So *right here* is where he's comin' tonight. We'll rest a bit more; an' then we'll hide near your corrals. Soon's it's

plumb dark, he's goin' to try an' steal a hoss from your remuda."

"Won't he start across the desert afoot?" Jimmy asked.

"He'd get lost, an' knows it! Nope! We've got him . . ."

Suddenly the sheriff quit in the middle of a sentence, stopped with a gasp of surprise. Every man but Jimmy grew rigid and tense as death, and all stared toward the door.

Jimmy sat with his back toward the entrance. He was studying his hand, and noticed only that the room was strangely quiet; and that all the light was shut off from the doorway.

"Two pair, king high," he announced.

He turned his cards over. Then he looked up, and saw that all his friends were petrified.

"Call it *ace high*!"

The words came from behind Jimmy. They were followed by a deafening pistol shot. And through the center of the king Jimmy had laid down on the table, appeared a round hole.

"I'm holdin' trumps in this game!" the voice ripped out. "Any hombre that makes a play I don't like, I'll blow him a lead kiss. *Reck, all of you!*"

THE PUNCHERS raised their hands high; all but Jimmy. Turning in his seat, he coolly eyed the newcomer.

The stranger crouched in the doorway, filling it with his six-foot-four of bulging muscle. He was a black-browed giant of thirty. Dust covered his chaps and vest and streaked his haggard face. One shirt sleeve was torn and blood-stained where a bullet had creased him. In his hands, like weaving snake heads, two long guns were leveled.

His smouldering eyes fixed on Jimmy. The gun that had fired over Jimmy's shoulder, pointed at him now.

"I reckon," Jimmy observed, "That you're Steve Fenton?"

"A bull's eye!" the rustler snapped. "Jack 'em up!"

The trigger of that Cold eared back.

Jimmy grinned, and spoke on. "Partner, you want something plumb bad. What is it?"

The rustler stared keenly at them all before answering.

"Which one of you polecats knows this desert best?"

The punchers had relaxed a bit, but at this question they stiffened. Tensely they looked at one another. In their eyes were deep misgivings. Fenton's purpose in asking was plain to them.

He wanted a puncher to lead him across this sand country to a place where he could find water for himself. However, the man who volunteered to guide him would never come back. Steve Fenton

would not let the only rider who could bring a posse to his new hideout, live to return.

A long minute passed without a word being uttered. Then Jimmy spoke up. The little smile had never left his lips.

"Speakin' of polecats, it ain't one of 'em that's raising the biggest smell around here. As for knowin' this desert, I cut my teeth on a sidewinder's rattles; an' I can find water where it ain't rained for a hundred years. I'm your man.

A flush spread over Fenton's dark face.

"Hombre," he warned, "another crack like that, an' I'll solder your lips with hot lead. Git up! Throw your partners' six-guns out that window. Grab 'em by the barrel. Yours, too!"

Jimmy obeyed.

"Now tie 'em all up with those lariats."

When Jimmy had finished, Fenton motioned to the door.

"Git outside!" he snapped. "You other hombres, if I see just one of you on our trail, I'll put this red-head's light out so sudden, it'll pop!"

FENTON prodded Jimmy into a run straight for the corrals.

"Rope your two best broncs!" he ordered.

Jimmy took his time about choosing horses. Already he was cooking up a scheme to catch Fen-

ton. It was a daring plan, and as dangerous as strolling in front of a herd of stampeding longhorns. But Jimmy had no choice. He was unarmed; while Fenton had two long guns that could speak his mind quickly and unmistakable. Even in a fair fight, Jimmy had as much chance of licking Fenton as a toad of outrunning a jack-rabbit.

Jimmy worked out the details of his plan while he caught and saddled two horses. This particular pair of broncs were called the "homing pigeons" on the Bar M. Out on the range, when not being ridden, they had to be anchored to a tree or rock they could not pull up. Otherwise, they streaked for the ranch corral as straight as bees to their hive.

When the two mounts were ready, Fenton growled another order.

"Lead the way to the cook shack. Fill two canteens an' get some grub. Shake a leg!"

Jimmy obeyed. To Fenton's saddle he fastened a small canteen. A large one, grub sack, and hobbles he tied to his own.

"Fork your boss!" Fenton then ordered. "Head west, an' ride hard for the nearest water!"

Jimmy spurred his bronc. Fenton tore along behind.

Jimmy kept well ahead of the rustler, with a purpose.

He held the big canteen against his saddle. Then he drew his jack-

knife from his pocket. Carefully he inserted the blade under the canvas cover, into the joint of the metal container. When he withdrew the point, water oozed out in a tiny stream.

Then he cut at the rope hobbles until they held by a single strand. A hefty jerk would break them. This done, Jimmy grinned. The cards were dealt in his game with Fenton.

They rode swiftly, with but short stops, most of that night. Just before dawn they reached Palm Canyon. Fenton decided on a brief rest. Gun in hand, he gave Jimmy orders.

"Take the hulls off'n the brones, an' hobble 'em."

Jimmy piled saddles, canteens, and grubsack on the ground. Then he led the horses to a patch of galleta grass and hobbled them.

When he had finished, Fenton bound him to a palm trunk.

"I'm goin' to sleep for an hour," the rustler declared. "Don't try nothin' funny, 'cause I wake up quicker'n a cat."

Then he lay down and wrapped himself in a blanket.

Jimmy did not shut his eyes. Intently he listened for hoof beats. And at last, from that patch of galleta grass, he heard a low trampling that faded off in the distance.

"There go those darn homin'

pigions!" he chuckled. "Wish I was ridin' one of 'em!"

He did not try to sleep then, but watched the dawn brighten into day. The sun came up like a blaze of fire. It flooded the canyon with light, and burnished the shaggy-topped palms so that they glistened like gold. A pair of mourning doves lined out through the gap. A cactus wren darted from a *sahuaru* to Jimmy's left, and flung him a spiral of plaintive melody.

He noticed all this with satisfaction. A day of intense heat lay ahead. And the hotter it was, the better for his purpose! *Now, he reflected, we're on even terms. No brones, an' soon no water. He's strong enough to tie me in a knot an' throw me a mile. He packs a six-gun an' he's achin' to use it. However, in this desert, a coyote can outsmart a timber wolf.*

A little later, Fenton awoke. After glancing at Jimmy to see that he was tied, the rustler started down the canyon for the horses.

Minutes passed. When he came back, a broken hobble was in his hand. He walked straight up to Jimmy, his face dark with rage.

"You cut these hobbles!" he declared savagely. "I ought to break your dang' neck!"

He struck Jimmy viciously across the chest with the rope.

Jimmy merely grinned.

"Blast you!" Fenton raged. "You won't laugh when you're

packin' my outfit in this blazin' sun. You'll wish to God I'd shot you!"

He turned abruptly away. Sitting on his spurs beside the saddles, he started to eat. After drinking what water was left in his small canteen, he opened the grub sack.

A blank look came on his face as he took out the food. Jimmy noticed his expression, and laughed out loud.

Fenton shot him a venomous look, but went on eating. Jimmy had brought a small piece of rank pork, salty crackers, and a jar of sour pickles. He had not been able to find any worse thirst-producing food in the cook shack.

The rustler ate every bit of the grub. Then he lifted the big canteen to his lips.

Nothing came out. He lowered the empty water container and stared at it in a queer, baffled way. He shook it gently; then vigorously, as if to fill it again by sheer *wanting* it full. But shaking was no use, and he realized it. His arm dropped. And his eyes looked hunted, panicky, like those of a trapped beast.

He wasted no time in swearing. Jumping up, he rushed at Jimmy like a wolf at a grouse.

Jimmy, tied fast to the tree, could not budge.

Fenton knotted his huge fingers about Jimmy's throat. Savagely he

shook Jimmy, banging his head against the palm trunk.

"Damn you!" he raged. "You fooled me! Now, you take me to water, or I'll choke the life out of you!"

His hands tightened. Jimmy grew limp with pain.

"All right!" he gasped. "I'll take you to Granite Tank. Only — maybe it's dry!"

"If it is," Fenton threatened, "I'll kill you. You hear me? *I'll kill you!*"

JIMMY LED Fenton north through Palm Canyon.

The valley grew narrow. Its walls straightened into sheer cliffs pierced by dark caverns, crested with turrets and palisades of fiery-hued granite. This glistening rock flung heat into the gorge, licking tongues of heat like blasts from a furnace.

At Palm Canyon's mouth, the mountains spread apart to surround a great salt plain. This expanse of ghastly white was flat as a billiard table. And it was just as barren. Not a cactus, not a spear of sacaton grass marred its surface. The sand lay as perfectly smooth as sediment in the bottom of a glass. On this level floor, salt diamonds flashed and sparkled. They kicked up like snow under Jimmy's and Fenton's feet.

Mile and mile and hour after hour, they plodded across this

sink. Fenton trudged ahead of Jimmy as strongly as if blazing sun rays were mild as moonlight. By nightfall, they reached the basin's far side, and came to a gap in its high wall.

Jimmy recognized this break with a feeling of dread. Wildhorse Pass it was called, and it led into Cabazon Desert. Today's travel had been torture; but in comparison with tomorrow's, it would seem like dozing in a hammock!

They entered the pass through a clump of filmy smoke trees. Under an overhanging rock, Fenton stopped.

"We camp here," he muttered.

Jimmy flung down his burden of blankets. "I'll rustle some wood," he said. "It gets cold at night."

Fenton hesitated. Then, his hand on his gun-butt in meaning fashion, he nodded.

Jimmy collected dry chaparral and built a fire.

Meanwhile Fenton looked about the gap. He was famished for food and water. But he searched in vain for something moist, for something he could shoot to eat. And finally, peevish as a sick bull, he plopped down beside Jimmy's fire and pulled a blanket over his shoulders.

Jimmy decided it was time to try his hand at rustling a meal. Telling Fenton he was going after more wood, he started off up the moonlit pass.

He was nearly worn out. Long

ago he had learned to stand one day of desert travel without drinking. But unless he got water tonight, a couple hours of tomorrow's sun would drop him like a wilted leaf!

Fenton, he realized, was going strong. Jimmy feared, now, that his scheme to capture the rustler was not going to pan out. In fact, he saw how his plan would probably boomerang! Fenton had to be his prisoner before they reached Granite Tank. Otherwise, if they found water, Fenton would escape. And if the tank were dry, Fenton would fill him so full of lead he would poison coyotes!

Around a bend in the pass, Jimmy found a niggerhead cactus. "Water," he observed, "is where you find it!"

With his knife he hacked off the top of the barrel-shaped niggerhead. Then he scooped a hole in its center, and pounded the pulpy walls. Into the depression oozed a clear liquid. It tasted flat as he gulped it down, but was satisfying.

"Now for something that'll stick to my ribs."

From a mesquite he jerked clusters of ripe beans. Sickle-shaped pods and all he ground on a rock, and added to water in the niggerhead. This made a thick gruel rich in sugar. He soon got his fill of it.

Then, on a limestone ledge he found clumps of strawberry cactus.

With a greasewood twig he whipped the prickles off the small, scarlet berries, and feasted on the juicy fruit.

On his way back to Fenton, he saw a thicket of prickly pears. Again he had to beat spines off the long, red berries. They were crisp and sweet.

"I reckon now," he mused, "I can stand another day of bein' roasted!"

Returning to camp, he dropped an armload of mesquite boughs on the fire. Then he lay down and soon fell into deep, strength-restoring sleep. His last impression was of Fenton mumbling swear words, unable to rest.

AT DAYBREAK, Jimmy was awakened by being yanked to his feet.

"Hombre," Fenton growled in his ear, "you lead me to Granite Tank, pronto, or I'll tear you apart!"

He piled his saddle blanket onto Jimmy's shoulders and shoved him onto the trail through Wildhorse Pass.

Jimmy took just four steps, and halted suddenly. Grabbing up a branch, he jabbed at something on the trail. Fenton stopped to look.

Pinned to the ground under Jimmy's stick, and exposed to the sun's full heat, wriggled a sidewinder. It squirmed fiercely, darting its head and lashing its tail.

"Watch!" Jimmy told Fenton.

A minute passed; two. Then gradually the sidewinder's struggles grew weak. After another couple of minutes, it ceased fighting altogether. It turned belly up, and lay quiet, dead.

"It's the heat," Jimmy explained. "Without water, a man dies mighty near as soon."

"Blast you!" Fenton swore. "Git up that trail!"

He struck out with his heavy boot. The kick flung Jimmy on his face in the dust. But he scrambled up without a word, and started doggedly on.

Half an hour's march took them through Wildhorse Pass to the edge of Cabazon Desert.

Here they stopped as suddenly as if they had turned a corner and faced a grizzly. The hot, fierce beauty of the scene ahead appalled them.

Sand dune after dune, dune after dune, drifted one behind the other to the horizon. From each slanting face and ridge, a fine mist of sand curled off and drifted away as smoky veils, weaving and tumbling in dainty spirals. It was like spray flying from the tops of immense billows. Off to the skyline they stretched, huge breakers of a yellow ocean halted in their race to the beach.

This was a region of glaring light, of quivering air, of vast and ceaseless motion, but no sound.

The quiet was weird and ghastly. Not even a croak came from a raven winging heavily over Jimmy's and Fenton's heads. Only a few *cattillo* cunes, rustling in skeleton dance nearby, broke the hot silence.

Jimmy raised his finger and pointed.

"That's Rimrock Mesa, 'way off Granite Tank's atop it. Take us two days to get there. If we last that long!"

Against the far horizon, flickering in the blanket of heat, stood Rimrock Mesa. It was an island of black lava jutting out of an opal sea.

"Git goin'!" Fenton growled.

Mile after mile, hour after hour, they plodded on.

The sun arched up and over, and started down again. Its rays beat on their skulls like falling bricks. Under that bombardment of heat even the dunes seemed to quiver.

Jimmy, because he had slept and had water, did not suffer much. But he could tell that Fenton was in trouble.

The rustler's lips and tongue were black. His throat was swollen. His eyeballs throbbed, and his heart beat so crazily that his head seemed full of hammers. A million needles of fire shot through his muscles. His lungs felt like they were gulping flame.

He tore open his vest and shirt.

Stalking on, hands on his six-guns, he matched his strength against the desert as if he fought a living enemy.

BY SUNDOWN Jimmy began to think that there was no limit to Fenton's endurance.

That night, Jimmy found a niggerhead and some prickly pears. He slept well. Fenton raved a bit. Toward dawn, he grew quiet.

In the morning, Rimrock Mesa was close. It loomed high and black out of writhing heat veils.

Jimmy figured that today the rustler would not stay on his pins an hour. But he did. And Jimmy saw that his plan to capture Fenton by walking the legs off of him, was not going to work. Fenton would last until they reached Granite Tank. If it were dry, Jimmy knew the rustler would give him as little chance for life as a wolf gave a hamstringed deer!

He had to make Fenton drop in his tracks. Before they reached the tank, Jimmy saw that he would have to wear Fenton out.

So Jimmy began to make the rustler use himself up.

"Fenton," he called out, "Granite Tank's empty! Your big carcass is goin' to feed those buzzards sailin' up yonder!"

Fenton stopped, and swayed unsteadily as he looked up. Rage shot through his body like a consuming flame. Trembling from

head to foot, he shouted curses and shook his fists at the carrion birds. Then he turned and swore at Jimmy.

"You pup!" he finished. "If that damn' tank's dry, I said I'd tear you apart. I ain't forgot!"

When he staggered on again, Jimmy grinned. The more Fenton boded over, the sooner he wasted the little strength he had left.

Jimmy played another trump. So far, he had lagged behind the rustler. Now Jimmy began to walk faster. He caught up with Fenton, and passed him.

"Come on!" Jimmy challenged. Let's get there before dark!"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a strained look come on Fenton's face. He guessed what was worrying the rustler.

Fenton knew that he had the endurance of a wild stallion. That a stringly little runt like Jimmy could keep up with him, was unbelievable. It stabbed his pride. It shook his faith in those huge muscles he gloried in. Though he was so near exhaustion that his head seemed to weigh a ton, he lurched into a quicker walk. He was going to pass Jimmy if it killed him.

UNDER A blazing sun, this pace was too hard to last long. After half a mile of it, Fenton sprawled flat on the sand.

Jimmy's heart leaped. If he

snatched one of those long Colts at Fenton's side, he could end this deadly game.

He bent over the rustler, and grasped the butt of one of Fenton's six-guns. But before he could draw it, the rustler's hand seized his wrist. Fenton turned his swollen face up.

"You blasted toad!" he snarled. "Think I'm petered out, hey? I'm strong enough to wring your neck!"

He yanked Jimmy down on the sand, and fastened his huge fingers around his throat. Jimmy struggled desperately to pull away. But in the rustler's grip he was helpless. Those big hands squeezed tighter and tighter. Jimmy's lungs seemed about to burst. Black shadows began to steal over his senses.

"Stronger'n me, hey?" Fenton muttered. "You red ant, if that tank's dry, next time I won't let go!"

He loosened his hold, and got to his feet again.

"Git up!" he yelled.

Drawing his foot back, he slammed Jimmy in the ribs. Then he bent down, and hauled Jimmy erect.

"Hit the trail! I ain't through with you yet!"

He shoved Jimmy on toward Rinrock Mesa again.

Jimmy was not hurt much. But for the first time since he left the

Bar M, he lost hope. He could not wear Fenton out. If Granite Tank were empty, Fenton would keep this threat to kill him. And at this time of year, Jimmy realized, water in the tank was scarce as boots on a rattlesnake.

In mid-afternoon they reached Rimrock Mesa. Without taking a rest, Fenton started up the steep trail to the top. Jimmy followed.

As he climbed, he noticed that the air had suddenly become very close and muggy. From somewhere came a low, meaning sound like the distant boom of surf. He did not realize what was happening until a few minutes later.

Granite Tank was a stone basin that caught occasional rain water. It lay near the edge of the cliff that fronted Rimrock Mesa.

When Jimmy reached the top, he saw Fenton standing beside the tank. Then something on the eastern horizon took all of Jimmy's attention.

Against the sky line, far out on the desert, a brown wall was rising up. It came rapidly toward Rimrock Mesa, growing higher every second. It was a cloud of sand so dense that it seemed solid. When it was half a mile away, he could see the dust whirling on its crest. On it came, faster than a racing antelope.

In a flash Jimmy realized what danger he and Fenton were in. That storm would sweep everything

not rooted to the rock, over the cliff edge. He had to warn Fenton.

He turned his head to shout. But after one glance at the rustler, he saw that he was too late. Cautioning Fenton now was useless as arguing with a charging bull. Fists raised, a look of fury on his swollen face, the rustler was coming toward him.

"Blast you!" Fenton shouted. "I'm goin' to kill you. *That tank's empty!*"

JIMMY SAW, that by lying on the tank bottom, they could both escape the storm. But first he had to knock some sense into the rustler. In half a minute that sand cloud would hit them.

So instead of dodging Fenton, Jimmy tore right into the rustler. Ducking a wild left swing, he got under Fenton's guard. Once, twice, Jimmy's fists smacked against the rustler's jaw.

Fenton reeled back, stumbled, and nearly fell. Before he could straighten up, Jimmy hammered a right into his stomach, and whipped a smashing left to the heart. Fenton slumped to his knees.

A look of intense surprise came to his face. Always before Jimmy had been helpless against him. Fenton's hand dropped to his six-gun.

Jimmy saw that the rustler's iron nerve was broken. Three days without sleep or water, three days of ploughing through the white

heat of the desert, were taking their toll. Fenton needed now the strength he had wasted in racing Jimmy, in beating him, and in climbing that mesa trail. The rustler was worn out, folding up like a burst balloon!

So Jimmy, as that Colt slid out of its holster, stepped close. His right hand came up from the knee.

Fist struck chin with a crack like a pistol shot. And Fenton toppled senseless to the ground.

Quickly Jimmy pulled him into the tank, and dropped flat beside him.

An instant later the storm struck the mesa like a wave breaking over a rock. The air grew dark with flying sand and gravel. Blasts of sand shrieked and howled over them. Terrific gusts of sand lashed across the mesa top, swooped into the tank, snatched at Jimmy's clothes, and cut into his skin like countless knives.

For five minutes the storm swirled about Rimrock Mesa. Then, as suddenly as it came, it passed on like a great billow of brown smoke.

Jimmy stood up and cleared his eyes and ears.

"Guess I've won this pot," he remarked. "Reckon now I've got to feed an' water this hombre. By

time I get him back to the Bar M, he's goin' to know there's more good points to a cactus than what shows on the outside."

Stooping, he bound Fenton's wrists together with the rustler's own holster belt.

"BUT—BUT," Sheriff Doty questioned Jimmy, didn't you *know* that there ain't been water in Granite Tank for months?"

The sheriff, Jimmy, and some riders were in the Bar M bunk-house.

"Yeah," Jimmy admitted. "I did kind of suspect Granite Tank would be empty. Y'see, Pete an' me were up there two weeks ago. An' then it was dry as a cat's back."

The sheriff gulped in surprise. But he was not through yet. "Say, just how did you lick this Fenton, Jimmy?"

"That was simple!" Jimmy declared. "I didn't catch him asleep, like you did. I waited 'till he was plumb awake. Then I made him wear himself out lickin' me. An' *then* I licked him."

"But," Doty insisted, "he's big enough to swallow you in one gulp!"

"Sheriff," Jimmy explained solemnly, "it ain't the size of a man's hat, but what's under it that counts."

FIGHTER'S SOCKS

by WALTER HOPPER MARTIN

TIME: Close enough to now

PLACE: A logging camp

Kid Beretti was a fighter who was determined not to fight until he was ready; and Logger Bull Kibby was equally determined to make the Kid fight now, or forever be branded coward.

WHEN KID BERRETTT'S rage threatened to mount beyond control he sank his ax into the shopping block and strode up and down before the woodpile, trying to get a grip on himself. "Damn that big palooka!" he growled. "I gotta keep from sockin' him! I gotta!"

But at every step the cold snow water sloshed over his feet and it was as if big Bull Kibby stood there in the little clearing in the big woods, tantalizing, goading him, heaping fuel upon his blazing wrath. Berretti glared down at the soggy moosehide moccasins which were so much too big for his small

feet. It was Kibby's fault that he had to wear those moccasins today.

Before he left camp for the cuttings with the others in the morning, Kibby had poured water in the Kid's leather-topped rubbers, and there was nothing for Berretti to do but wear these big gunboats belonging to the cook. They soaked up the slush like blotting paper.

Kibby was clever as the devil at goading a man into fighting rage. Two months of his persistent persecutions had left the Kid's nerves raw, his resolve shaken. Increasingly it grew upon him that the most desirable thing in the world was to throw caution to the winds and leap like a wildcat upon the big bully, to beat his face into a pulp, rub out the insults and humiliations of the past weeks with flashing fists. Nothing else mattered any more—nothing.

And that was just the way Kibby wanted the Kid to feel about it. Kibby wanted the Kid to attack him. He wanted to fight. Secure in his great strength and bulk, he felt confident he could flatten the little boxer from New York with ease. And to beat up the bantamweight challenger—that would be glory for Bull Kibby.

A partridge sailed across the clearing and plunged deep into the sheltering boughs of a spruce for the night.

Berretti's eyes followed its flight

listlessly. He was trying to make himself remember that he was cookeeing in this lumber camp because the work would toughen, strengthen his hands. Those hands, twisted, misshapen, bore mute testimony to the terrific punching power with which he had battered his way up through the ranks for a chance at the crown. "Glass hands", the sports writers called them, and prophesied that they couldn't stand five rounds of crashing against the granite jaw of Champion Paddy Sullivan.

The clammy chill of the January thaw struck to Berretti's marrow and he shivered. He hooked a cold wet foot over his knee and fell to massaging it with his hands. There was small comfort in this though, and he soon left off, to finger the soft texture of the heavy red woolen sock which ringed his leg above the high moccasin. He wondered if the soaking would shrink the feet. He hoped not, because Ma Berretti had knit those socks with her own hands, knit them from the reddest yarn in New York.

Ma Berretti, whose heart was so set on her bambino's winning the championship and who prayed each night that the good God and the hard work together might mend the battered hands—what would Ma Berretti think if he lost his temper and busted his mitts on Kibby?

He flexed the thick, blunt fingers inspected the hard, round little fists. "Gripes!" he said. "Them mitts is as good as new right now. What a sucker I'd be to take a chance of bustin' 'em on a palooka like Kibby!"

The rotund figure of Pete Laframboise, camp cook, appeared in the open door of the cook-shack. "Hurry op, Keed!" he shouted. "Shake some speed on dat woodpile. Bambye mens is be here and holler for hees supay, all hongry lak wan b'ar!"

"Oke, chief! I'll finish this an' be in to help yuh in a minute!"

IT WAS NEARLY dark when the men returned from the cuttings far back in the spruce. The teamsters went directly to the hovel to feed and bed their horses for the night, but the choppers, sled tenders and yarders, about a dozen of them, paused expectantly at the woodpile to watch Kibby badger the cookee.

Kibby, towering over the little fighter like a bull moose, fastened his close-set, mean little eyes upon the Kid in a contemptuous stare. "Gosh, look at them big shoepacs the little yaller-belly's wearin'," he taunted. "I bet he wishes he was man enough to fill 'em."

Kibby's satellites guffawed and Berretti gripped hard on his ax. "L'sten, big boy." His voice was strained. "Try to get it through

your thick skull that you can't bulldoze me into no fight. I ain't gonna take no chances of bustin' my hands on a big palooka like you, see? Now beat it! Scram!"

"Oh, yeah? Wal, mebbby this'll make yuh think diff'rent!" With a flick of the wrist Kibby flung a handful of slush into Berretti's face and the Kid, stung by the unexpected deluge, dropped the ax and put both hands to his eyes.

As the ax chunked into the snow its keen blade whispered through Berretti's moccasin, slicing the soaked moosehide as if it had been putty. A crimson stream trickled through the ugly gash, forming a widening red stain upon the snow.

Berretti stared open mouthed, awed, while the full import of the mishap surged upon him. As if in a dream he saw his championship hopes fade away into the reddened snow at his feet. The foot did not hurt much, but he realized that the shock of the catastrophe dulled the physical pain. In the space of a watch tick the work and struggle of years was made meaningless, wasted. Hope was blown out like a candle. Just when his battered hands were ready to reach out and grasp the crown which was his life's ambition, fate stepped in, grinning, and robbed him of a foot.

Crying out against the brutal irony, the bitter injustice of it, Kid

Berretti flung himself upon the man who had so mercilessly wrecked, ruined him.

Kibby, startled, threw out an awkward left to ward off the furious attack and his big fist caught Berretti in the forehead, spinning him into the snow as if he had been a bundle of rags stuffed with sawdust. The big man, exultant, lurched forward to make the most of his advantage—to end the fight with his heavy boots before Berretti could rise.

"Fight! Fight!" At the blood-stirring cry the teamsters and the cook came running, but the fight was ended while they were yet racing toward the scene.

Like a ball of rubber Berretti bounded to his feet and got set to meet the onrushing bulk. He darted in with the speed of a light beam, sinking a terrific right to the solar plexus. The blow had the smash of a heavy bullet, burying the hard little fist clear to the wrist in Kibby's paunch. It seemed 'n-credible that so small a man could hit so hard.

Kibby was stopped in full stride, as if he had brought up against a granite building. The breath left him with an agonized grunt and he toppled face forward into the snow, like a giant hemlock that has felt the bite of steel.

Berretti hit him four times in the

face before he touched the ground. Left! Right! Left! Right! Fast as lightning those little fists flickered out, backed by all the science and strength the Kid possessed, and they hit with the sound of splintering bone.

The Kid sighed and sank upon the chopping block, disheartened, discouraged. He held his hands up to Laframboise. "Look at them mitts. I hit him with ev'rythin' got an' never hurt 'em a mite. An' now," his voice broke in a sob, "now that I got my hands in champeenship shape I'm all washed up with the fight game on account of I lose a foot."

"Lemme see it." The cook kneeled and grasped the reddened moccasin, gently prying apart the gaping vent. He stared uncertainly in the dim light, then exploded: "Ba Tonnerre! You feels ain't git cut, Keed! Dat's only ma beeg moccasin what git de slash! Ba-gosh, ax, she's not break the skin, even!"

Kid Berretti's eyes widened. "But . . . but the blood on the snow?"

Laframboise threw an exuberant arm around the Kid's shoulders. "Ba cripe! You know what I t'ink, me? I t'ink bleed what you see on de snow is notting but red snow water what come from de red sock what you wear!"

THE LOOSE-LEAD DOG

by PHILIP COLE

TIME: Klondike Days

PLACE: The frozen North

Mike Iseroff figured he had it made. He'd suckered Joe Reece into a bet on Alec Roberts's dogs—a hundred thousand dollars that Alec's dogs could beat Bob Skeen's team from Tackamut to Andreofski, in a race any time inside a week from the day of the wager. And it was agreed that both contestants had to use the dogs they had right when the bet was made. So all Iseroff had to do was to arrange for some one to shoot Roberts's lead dog—not at all difficult to arrange—then he'd get Joe Reece's mine and all his holdings.

"I'LL BET YOU fifty thousand dollars he can't do it. Put up or shut up."

"All right, I'll take your measly

bet and make it fifty thousand more if you've got the guts to put it up; what do you say to that, Mr. Rockefeller?"

Joe Reece and Michael Iseroff faced each other grimly across a liquor-splashed table in Klondike John's back room. The onlookers began backing away. When a pair with reputations like those of Joe and Mike hooked up with each other, the fur was due to fly. Joe was down river on his periodical spree from his mine on the Porcupine. He had left a heavy bag of dust with Klondike John for safe keeping when he got in the night before. Mike had no mine, but he had a seemingly never-failing store of yellow money. Those who knew him around Andreafski had too much sense to ask him where it came from, but most people thought its source had something to do with the lucrative enterprise of hootlegging illegal sealskins out around Cape Chihokak.

The crowd was all for Joe. Joe was loud and blustering, dangerous when he was drunk, and he was full of red liquor now, but he had been a friend in need to many a man in the room when grub was scarce and a man was out of luck. He had grubstaked many a down-and-outer in the days before his claim on the Porcupine made him rich. In those days he was generally hard up himself, but never too broke to help a friend.

The dark, slender Mike was not drunk. He was cold and watchful. A tricky customer; most men gave

him a wide berth and didn't bother him. The spectators looked for shooting any minute.

Mike held Joe's gaze with his snake-like eye and called out to the proprietor without looking around, "Come over here a m'nute Mister John. We want you to hold stakes for us."

Klondike John, who wore a long, drooping mustache, like an oldtime prospector, and who was never seen without a black Stetson slanted over one eye, looked contemplatively at his two customers, gave the bar another wipe, shifted his quid into the other cheek and sauntered over, eyeing the two warily as he came. "What's the conditions?"

"You name 'em, Joe," suggested Mike.

Joe hoisted himself in his chair, assumed the air of a learned judge on the bench, looked up with blurred eyes at Klondike John, lounging with pretended nonchalance against the next table, and stabbing at the wet table top with a leathery finger, laid down the terms of the bet.

"I bet Mike Iseroff a hundred thousand dollars that Alec Robert's dogs can beat Bob Skeen's team from Tlacamut to Andreafski, in a race any time inside of a week from now."

"They both got to use the dogs they got now," put in Mike. "That all right?"

"Yeah, that's understood."

"Just as well have it plain," said Mike.

Joe plunged his hands down under his mackinaw, searched, brought them out again empty. He grinned at John. "I forgot. You've got my dust, John. If I lose, weigh it out and pay Mike, here. If that ain't enough, there's plenty more where that came from. Now you shower down, Mister Mike. Let's see what you got to back up your side."

Mike smiled. "John's got my kick, too. I'll leave it to him. I can meet his bet, can't I, John?"

"I reckon so."

"That suit you, Joe?"

"All right with me."

The proprietor shot a mouthful of juice in the general direction of a sawdust box, and said in his most formal manner, "All right, gentlemen. I understand if Alec Roberts wins this here race with his dogs, I pay the whole pot to Joe, an' if Bob Skeen's team wins the race, then I pay it all over to Mike, that right?"

"Yeah, that's right," growled Joe.

Mike grinned and nodded at the proprietor. The other occupants of the back room gathered around once more.

"Drinks for the crowd," boomed Joe, waving his arm at John's assistant behind the bar.

MIKE DOWNED his in one gulp and slipped out unobserved. Outside, he looked up and down the sled track that served for a main street. Nobody was out; it was too cold. Mike went down the street at a jog-trot to Bob Skeen's cabin at the far end—a low-walled, log house with one room. There was a dog corral at the back.

Bob looked up from his harness mending as Mike entered. "Howdy, Mike," he said.

"Howdy Bob. Say, you're dogs all right? Running good, are they?"

"Sure, they always run good."

"Can you beat Roberts's team on a thirty-five mile run right now?"

"Sure I can."

"You better! Look here Bob, you an' I've made some pretty good killin's bettin' your dogs. But this is a big one. I'm layin' for Joe Reese. I want his mine. He's come down here with all the dust he's got in the world, an' he needs it bad. He's got to put up for a new stamp mill an' his crews are hollerin' for six months wages. He's got to cash in this dust for all that. Now I've got him to bet all he's got on Alec Roberts beatin' you from Tlackamut to Andreefski. If you win this race we'll clean him out, get his dust and the mine too. We don't want

any mistake about this, Bob."

"That's fine, what you get, Mike. What do I get?"

"You get ten thousand dollars."

"How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

The little half-breed's eyes flashed. The girls, the gaudy clothes, the liquor he could buy with ten thousand dollars! Then the thought of the possibility of losing all that scared him. "We got to beat him, sure," he said.

"You're damn right, we've got to beat him. If it's goin' to take more'n just your dogs to do it, we want to start it right now. Don't want any slip-up on this. It's got to be sure."

Skeen grinned furtively. "What you t'ink we do to make it sure?"

"Well, there's two or three things we can do. We got to plan. I'll see to that. You, you better look after your dogs, damn close; see nothin' happens to 'em. What else can you do?"

"I don't know. Perhaps me, I got a little wolf poison. It not good for dogs either. They eat some, don't run so fast, maybe."

"All right, slip into Alec's corral with some if you get a chance. But be damn careful. Alec'll kill you if he catches you 'round his dogs. What day'll we say we'll race, Monday?"

"Monday all right for me."

"We'll make it Monday then. Watch your step now, Bob. Don't

let nothing happen. I ain't so damn flush myself. I got some people to square, and it takes plenty money. An' if I don't square 'em I'll be in for about twenty years. Don't want that!" The rest of their brief conversation was in whispers, Mike having first opened the door to make sure no one was outside.

TEN MINUTES later Mike slipped in through the back door of Hardy's store. Keeping out of sight of anyone else who might be up front, he caught Hardy's eye and beckoned to him. Hardy came right back. Mike was a good customer.

"Hardy, you do something for me," said Mike, talking out of the side of his mouth, "and keep your mouth shut, an' I'll give you plenty money."

"What's is it?" asked Hardy, somewhat guarded.

"Nothing hard. Nothing to make any trouble. You got any stuff to send up to Ten-mile?"

"Got a little stuff that came in for them last trip. I was bolding it to send up Saturday."

"That's just what I want. Now here's what you do. You're wantin' to get this stuff up to Ten-mile ahead of the regular haulers, an' so you hire Alec Roberts to take it up tomorrow morning with his dog team, see?"

"Yeah. I see, but what for?"

"What do you care what for? I pay you for it. Well, I'll tell you," said Mike with a great appearance of frankness, "it's this way. I've got a big bet up with Joe Reece on a race; Roberts's dogs against Bob Skeen's. It'll be Monday. Roberts has been runnin' hell out o' his dogs lately, and I figure to get 'em still worse done up. He'll want to lay up now and rest 'em for this race, but if you offer him money enough, he'll go, see?"

"How high'll I go when I talk to him?"

"Go to five hundred if you have to."

"God, you must have a bet up — five hundred?"

"Sure. But look here now, don't let anybody know I talked to you. Do this yourself, and don't spill it. If Alec goes up to Ten-mile tomorrow with his regular team, there'll be five hundred in it for you, too."

"You sure that's all you want, Mike, for a thousand dollars? Seems like a lot just to get them dogs tired. That all there is to it?"

"Yeah, sure. Look here, Hardy; what you want for five hundred? You just do like I say and keep shut up about it, an' you'll get yours; that's all you want, ain't it?"

Hardy agreed and they separated. Mike went off toward the

Indian camp a mile up river beyond the point.

Meanwhile Alec, summoned to Klondike John's back room by one of Joe's friends, had been told about the bet Joe had made on him and his dog team. Alec liked Joe. He had been one whom Joe had helped, and the two had been friends for a long time. Joe was quieter when Alec came in than he had been when the bets were made. The two went to a table in a corner and talked a while. Joe very earnest, Alec with growing interest. As soon as Alec understood the terms of the race, and had Joe's promise of a generous reward for winning it, they got up and went out together. At the door they met a messenger from Mike, proposing Monday as the day. They said that suited them.

Joe decided to go over to Alec's shack and stay there with him, to help him get ready for the race. As they approached Alec's cabin the dogs began to bark from their enclosure in the rear.

"Let's go 'round and look at 'em," said Joe. "You got the same team you had last winter, ain't you?"

"I got one new dog, a big red one. Ol' Judy, she died in the summer. I got this red dog from Jack Petiquay to take her place. Not so smart as Judy, but he's stronger, and just as fast. It's the best team 'round here, anyway." They stood

looking over the palings while the dogs, hoping for a feed, jumped and barked, and tried to lick Alec's hand. "Lie down, Castor! Look out, Moose! What're you after, Nix? Come here Rex."

A dark brindled dog, a little smaller than the others, came circling around the jumping mob to answer Alec's call. He held himself clear of the rest of the dogs, and they made way for him, watching him out of the corners of their eyes.

"Old Rex, eh, Alec?" asked Joe.

"You bet that's old Rex. Best lead-dog on the river—has been for eight years." Alec caressed Rex's muzzle.

"Ain't he gettin' a little old for teamin'?"

"Well, he's older'n the rest of 'em o' course, but he's still the boss. He keeps the rest of 'em in their place—never seen a dog no smarter'n him. He's the best dog I got, or ever will have. He can run like hell, too."

JOE HELPED ALEC with the dogs' afternoon feed. They boiled up a big pail of corn meal mush and set it out in the dingle to cool. Alec chopped at his store of frozen salmon until he had separated six fish from the solid mass—one for each dog. When the mush was cool, they fed the dogs. The big animals were ravenous. Joe and Alec quickly placed six

separate messes of mush in different parts of the yard, to keep the dogs apart while they bolted their food. After the mush, each dog got a fish; a big supper for a day when they had not been out to work. The idea was to give them a little extra every meal now until the day before the race, to build up their strength and energy.

The feeding over, Joe said he'd go over to Klondike John's for a while. Alec hated to have him go, expecting he would get drunk again, but couldn't say anything. When Joe had gone, Alec fixed his own supper. When he opened the back door to throw out the water he'd washed the dishes in, he thought he saw a shadow near the dog pen. Was it a stump, or a man crouching? There was no stump in that place. Alec shut the door, to keep the light from outlining him in the doorway, and called out, "Who's that?"

The shadow rose quickly and started to run. It was a man—on snowshoes. Alec plunged in pursuit. Before he had gone ten steps Alec was out of his own trodden back yard, and up to his thighs in deep snow, where he floundered, unable to keep up the chase. It was lucky that he couldn't go farther. Just as he realized that pursuit without snowshoes was impossible, he became conscious of the fact that the dogs were snarling with the unmistakable note that

told him they were quarreling over food. They had wolfed down their supper an hour ago. What were they snarling over now?

Alec lunged back to the corral and leaped the palings, landing in the middle of the growling pack. He picked up the thing they had been fighting over, kicking right and left to keep the jumping dogs off, and hurled it over the fence—something wrapped in sacking. The dogs had torn the sacking to ribbons.

Alec jumped out of the dogyard and examined the torn object. It was a big piece of moose meat, not frozen and quite fresh. He took it to the dingle and brought out a lantern. With a knife he explored the meat and found what he had suspected. Deep down in slits cut in the meat here and there, was pasty stuff. It had been powder when put in the slits, but blood had soaked and discolored it. Alec knew what it was, though. It was poison! Who would try to poison his dogs? The dirty louse! Alec had not an enemy in the world that he knew of. Something that had happened recently had earned him one. It must be the race.

He went out to look at the snowshoe tracks. They were round and wide, made by an Indian "bear-paw" snowshoe. But that told him nothing. It might as well have been worn by a white man as by an Indian. Everyone in the region

wore about that same pattern, and all the snowshoes were made about the same, by the Indians. A good thing he'd reached the deadly parcel before the dogs had time to tear into the meat!

This was a new idea to Alec. He'd been in a good many races, and he'd heard of other men having trouble of that kind in other places, having to sit up nights and guard their dogs. But nothing like this had ever happened around here. Men here were good sports, no matter how much money was bet. They wouldn't stoop to try a trick like that. So Alec made up his mind there must be something at stake in this race that he didn't understand, and resolved to take counsel with Joe the minute he returned. The two could keep watch on and watch off, guarding the team until the race.

JOE GOT IN late. It was almost one o'clock when he came in carrying his duffle bag, prepared to spend the night. Alec told him about the attempt at poisoning. Joe looked serious. In thinking about the business since this afternoon, he had come to have a feeling that Mike Iscroff had gone out of his way to induce him to make the bet. He had dimly sensed something behind Mike's eagerness to get him into this. Now, with the poisoned meat to conjecture about, he began to suspect the

truth; that this was no idle sporting proposition, but that Mike Isacoff was out to clean him, to ruin him, and now he knew Mike would not stop with a mere bungled attempt at poisoning dogs. The next move would be more serious. Joe was thoroughly awake now to the full extent of the danger. Alec's next words caused him fresh worry.

"Mr. Hardy was over here to-night. He's got a lot of canned fruit and stuff to send up to Ten-mile. It came in from down below yesterday, and he said he didn't want to wait till Saturday to send it up. Said he'd pay me double regular freight to take it up, because the engineers want it quick, and he's afraid if he puts it on a tote team they won't keep it covered and moving, and it might freeze."

"Alec, you don't want to be making any trips like that till after your race. You want to get your dogs rested up—that's the idea now."

"Yeah, I know it is, but he was sure anxious, and said he couldn't get anybody else, and he wouldn't trust anybody like he would me with the stuff, and he offered to give me two hundred dollars besides the freight."

"Well, you didn't take it, did you?"

"Yeah, Joe, I did; that is half of it. He'll give me the other half

when I get back, tomorrow night. You see Joe, it's just a short run. I'll take it easy; take all day to go up and back. It'll really do the dogs good, and won't hurt 'em any."

"I think after what's happened, those dogs ought to stay right here in the corral with us watchin' everything they eat, and every man that comes near the place."

"Yeah, I know, but nobody can poison 'em out on the river with me, an' the work'll do 'em good. It's a light load and I won't ride. Alec, that's too much money to turn down just for an easy little day's trip like that!"

"I'd give you more'n that to stay in camp."

"It ain't that, Joe. If I really believed it'd do any harm, I wouldn't go a step, you know that."

Joe knew Alec was honest about it, so he was forced to give in. He was worried, though, and made up his mind to make the trip up to Ten-mile with Alec and the dogs next day.

Late the next afternoon Joe was bound to admit that his fears had been apparently groundless. They were returning from the hike up to Ten-mile. The dogs were romping along enjoying being out. The work was light, and as Alec had promised, seemed to have been better for the team than lying around in the corral.

Alec was walking along in front

of the dogs, tramping down with his snowshoes the snow that had fallen during the day and made the trail a little heavy. Joe was behind the sled, his hand on the gee-pole. It wasn't necessary to help the dogs, but to restrain them to keep old Rex the leader from treading on the webs of Joe's snowshoes. It was dusk.

A rifle cracked from the trees on the left bank of the river. Alec halted. He stared toward the far shore.

"Get down, get down!" yelled Joe. "Shootin' at us! Look at Rex!"

Alec turned, dropping to one knee. Rex was down, kicking in the snow, bleeding from a bullet crease across his back. Alec raised the old dog's head, but he knew he was gone. As Alec held him, Rex's kicks became spasmodic, then ceased, and he stiffened. Suddenly he relaxed and his head dropped. He was dead; his back broken.

ALEC, ON HIS knees, the dead lead-dog in his arms, stared again through the deepening dusk at the dark trees on the river bank. He swore horribly, his lips drawn back from his teeth.

"Get down, Alec! You'll get it yourself!" shouted Joe.

"No, by God! I'm goin' after the son of a gun that killed old Rex." Alec started up.

"Damn it, Alec, have some sense! You've got no gun. He'll get you before you've gone ten steps. This is a shoot-and-run proposition. Whoever fired that shot is half a mile away in the woods by now. It's gettin' dark. The thing now is to get in home. I'll put a gang o' men on that trail tomorrow mornin', an' maybe we'll get this dog killer all right." Joe didn't believe this, but he wanted to quiet Alec. "No use us gettin' killed now. We can't do nothin' to a man with a rifle even if we could catch him in the dark. Lay still a minute till we make sure he's gone."

Alec gave up. Muttering heart-broken curses he undid old Rex's traces. The other dogs were lying down in the trail below the level of the snow, and were in no danger.

They waited five minutes. As Joe said, there was nothing they could do. It was dark now. They listened intently, but heard no sound.

"That skunk has gone, just like I said," said Joe.

Alec said nothing. He rose, took off a snowshoe and started to scoop a deep hole in the snow. Joe helped him. They worked in silence. When they had dug down to the ice, Alec gathered old Rex up and lowered him into the hole. They covered the dog, and packed the snow tightly over him.

"He'll go out with the ice when

the river breaks up in the Spring," said Alec. His voice was dull and toneless. "There goes the best dog I ever had."

"I reckon so," said Joe, "and there goes our race." He didn't add, and there goes my mine, but that is what he thought.

"Mike Iseroff did that," grated Alec.

"Most likely not him, but some Indian he hired to do it," returned Joe. "It's the same thing, but we'll never prove it on him. He's too slick for that, and all the Indians are scared of him. They won't any of 'em tell who was out o' camp this afternoon, even if we was to follow that trail right into their camp. We'll get a posse out to find out all we can, but it'll be a cold trail, you'll see."

It was a glum, discouraged procession that made its way slowly down the trail to the village, and Alec's cabin. While they unharnessed the dogs, fed them, and prepared and ate their own supper, they had little to say. After supper they sat gloomily smoking beside the red-hot wood stove. Alec's small black and white terrier came and thrust his nose into Alec's hand. Alec absently patted the little dog's head. Suddenly, as he looked down at the terrier a thought struck him. He gazed at the rough-coated fox-terrier a minute, and as he did so a slow grin spread over his face.

"Joe!" he said.

"Yeah?" Joe was in low spirits.

"We've got a chance yet! I just thought o' somethin'."

"What is it, Alec?"

"This little feller here, this terrier the city man I guided last fall give me, he's a dam good loose-lead dog."

"What's a loose-lead dog? Never heard o' that."

"Petiquay told me about it. The Indians down in Canada use 'em. It's this way. They take a little dog, like you make a pet of—one that's strong and fast enough to run out in front of the other dogs when they're pullin' the sled. Well, they put this little dog in front of the other dogs all the time, so's to made the sled-dogs jealous, an' feed him extra in front o' them, and keep him in the tent all the time where the big dogs want to get but ain't allowed, an' all like that, see? So the sled-dogs get to hatin' this little dog like poison, an' every time he runs out in front of 'em when they're hitched they damn near pull the traces loose from the sled tryin' to get at him."

"D'you mean that little scrapper there can do that way?" demanded Joe.

"Yeah, he can. Couple o' weeks ago when I was stayin' up river waitin' for Petiquay to make my new sled, I had plenty o' time, an' I trained him like that, an' it works good. Them dogs o' mine'll chase

him all day, an' run half again faster when he's out front. They're always hopin' he'll fall down or somethin' so's they can get at him, they hate him so bad for bein' the king bee around here. But he's smart. He never runs off; he stays in the trail about ten feet or so in front of 'em, an' looks like he enjoyed it like a game. He looks back an' kids 'em, like, an' the big dogs whine an' pull like hell tryin' to catch up."

"Can he last for a thirty-five mile race?" asked Joe, interested.

"Why sure, he's in great shape. See how hard he is? You see he don't pull nothin'. Sure he can last." Alec grinned hopefully. "It's a good chance, anyhow."

"You think so, honest, Alec—with old Rex not in the team?"

"Sure I do. I wouldn't wonder if they'd go faster without Rex with little Small-chance, here, runnin' out in front of 'em. Ol' Rex was slowin' down some. He was all right—best I ever had for any ordinary speed, but I'm tellin' you them big dogs sure do go a heap faster'n sled-dogs usually go when they get to thinkin' about eatin' up this pet terrier."

Joe's rugged face had lost its blank discouragement. A new hope had dawned. He got up and walked the floor, cracking his knuckles. Alec and the little terrier watched him as he strode back and forth. All at once Joe burst out with a

roar of laughter. "They think they've got us licked with their dirty trick, huh? By God, we'll beat 'em yet, eh, Alec?"

Alec sprang up. "I believe it, Joe. No more hard luck, now, an' good goin' Monday, an' I'll beat Bob Skeen into Andrafski by ten miles."

Jubilantly they prepared for bed, but neither was sleepy. For a long time they lay in their bunks smoking and discussing the approaching race, when they would outwit Mike and his dog murderers.

ON SATURDAY they hiked slowly up to Tlackamut with a crowd of Joe's friends, the dogs walking along pulling a sled, empty except for the small fox-terrier, who stood impudently on the sled, riding most of the way. On Sunday the dogs rested. Joe's party, with Alec and the dogs, were quartered in the cannery storehouse. Bill Turner, one of Joe's pals, just down from the mine, came in from the saloon where he had been spending Sunday evening. There had been a lot of talk at the saloon about the race.

Skeen's team had been in Tlackamut since Friday night and Mike Iszeroff was with him. Mike had hired a ten-dog team, and was planning to follow the contestants to watch the race all the way.

"We got to watch out he don't pull some more dirty work," said Joe.

"We sure will," said Bill. "I got me some pretty good dogs, too, an' so has Tod Muller an' two or three more. An' we'll have a few Winchesters, too. The skunk better not start nothin'!"

"He'll raise a holler, likely, when he sees what we got in the bag," said Joe. The secret of the loose-lead dog had been chuckled over by the crowd in the storehouse, and had been the cause of a lot of side-betting on the part of Joe's and Alec's friends.

"Let him holler. He's lookin' for somethin'. He don't understand why we're all bettin' on Alec since he lost old Rex. But he was the one put in the part about usin' dogs they'd got now. I heard him myself. Well, Alec's had Smallchange all winter, ain't he? Sure he has! That's all O.K. He may holler, but he better not do no more'n holler!"

Joe's hopes were bolstered up a good deal by his friends' confidence, but he was worried. The loose-lead dog idea seemed like a good one, but he was desperately afraid something might go wrong yet—some unforeseen additional catastrophe occur. He had too much at stake. Try as he would to be a good sport and to appear calm in the face of the possible loss of everything he had in the

world, he couldn't help worrying. He looked care-worn and old. His grin was forced. He had no appetite. When the teams lined up at the start next morning he stood in the background with Bill Turner, watching carefully for signs of anything irregular.

THE ENTIRE population was gathered around the two teams, appraising and betting. Bob Skeen's team of six wolflike huskies attracted the most attention, and those betting on them were willing to give odds. Alec's dogs looked nondescript. They were bigger and heavier than Skeen's dogs, but they were not to be compared with the huskies for looks. Alec didn't stick to one breed. His dogs were mongrels, mixtures of all the big breeds, of all shapes and colors, and there were only five of them. Nobody counted the little fox-terrier that Alec carried under his arm. They thought he was just a pet—a mascot. He couldn't pull, of course.

"All set?" shouted the starter. Bob and Alec, standing at their gee-poles, nodded.

"Go!" yelled the starter. The race was on. Amid wild yells and popping of long-lashed whips by the two drivers, and the shouts and cheers of the spectators, the teams leaped forward and tore down the street. Skeen's huskies took the lead as they raced for the top of

the slope that led down on the frozen river. At the top of the incline, Bob jumped on his sled, yelling at his dogs; then he looked back and waved derisively at Alec.

Alec was taking it easy. As they dashed down the incline he swung on his sled and settled down to a stern chase through the early part of the race. His long racing experience taught him that a following team tires less at the same speed than does a leading team. His five dogs needed all the advantage his knowledge of the tricks of the game could give them. The little terrier was still under his arm. Part of the spectators, trailing along behind, wondered why Alec burdened himself with a mascot that seemed only to be in his way.

They reached the ice. Alec yelled at his dogs, who jumped forward in pursuit of Bob's team, now well ahead. Alec was satisfied with his position for the present. His dogs were fresh and keen. They jumped into their work with a vim that made the runners sing on the hard snow. The spruces on the river bank went streaking by in the opposite direction. The sled was moving so fast that Alec's eyes were watery. He sang and yelled as he rode the sled, and popped his whip above the dogs' backs.

"Mush on, Moose! Come on, now, Castor, jump into it! Nix! Run, you old lumberin' jackass!

Hi-yi-yi-yi! Yaaa-a-a!" The sled pitched and slewed while Alec clung and yelled and waved his whip, almost forgetting the little terrier, who had struggled out of his grasp and was crouching in his lap, yapping with excitement. "It's not your time yet, Small-change," Alec laughed at him. "Wait a while!"

The galloping team rounded a point. Alec could see Bob out ahead. He was no farther away. Alec was holding even. He imagined he was even gaining a little already. All the rest of the forenoon their relative positions remained the same, but near noon as they raced down a long straight stretch of the river toward a point two miles ahead, Alec commenced urging his dogs with more insistence.

His dogs were apparently untired. Bob, overconfident because of having held his lead all morning, had let his dogs slack up a little. Alec was beginning to overhaul the team in front. Still he waited. He would not play his trump card until he rounded the point.

Beyond the point the river widened out. There was a stretch of three miles where the river was nearly a mile in width. As Alec came around the point and looked ahead he saw that the wind had swept the ice clear of snow. But the ice was not smooth and slick.

That would have sent the dogs sprawling, with nothing to give a hold for their claws. Some time previous to the wind that had swept the snow from the ice, there had been a slight thaw, or a rise in the stage of the river had flooded the ice under the snow. In the following freeze the lowermost layer of snow had frozen to the ice, making a roughened surface, hard as ice itself, but forming the best possible footing for the flying dogs.

This suited Alec exactly. It offered him the opportunity he wanted to spurt and pass Bob's team. In the snow trail, which was a single track, passing was all but impossible. A racer usually had to remain behind until a mishap, a broken trace, or some such accident forced the leading sled to stop. But here, on the wide wind-swept ice, one track was as good as another. If Alec could get enough speed out of his dogs, he could pass Bob, and this was probably his only chance.

The little terrier's excitement had been growing all the morning. He had been forced to stay still all day so far, and had not had his usual romp. He was a quivering bundle of impatience. Now was the time to use him.

Alec picked the little dog up with both hands. "All right, tike, here's where you begin to do your stuff!" he laughed, and tossed the terrier

lightly on to the ice. The pup scrambled for an instant, getting his legs under him, then he was off like a shot toward his home and fireside.

MOOSE AND CASTOR and the other dogs slewed their heads round to see what was going past them so fast, then, seeing that the black-and-white streak was the fox-terrier they hated so because of their master's favoritism toward him, pulled in their lolling tongues, dug their nails into the footing, and started after him with every ounce of power they possessed. The sled leaped forward with a rush of renewed speed. The team fairly flew.

They hated Smallchange because he was always fed first. They hated him because he slept in the warm cabin on blankets, while they made the best of it in their cold corral outside. They hated him because he got most of the pats, most of the kind words. They hated him because he did not wear harness, while they did. Every dog in the team had a hankering ambition to tear him into small pieces and eat the pieces. If they had caught him, the terrier would not have lasted two minutes.

But of course they couldn't catch him. He was light on his feet, and quick as a wink. He was headed for home, and he galloped along just ahead of the straining, whim-

ing team-dogs, adding to their wild efforts to catch him by giving them an occasional look over his shoulder as he ran. The little dog appeared to know exactly what the situation was, and to regard their chase of him as a huge joke.

On they flew, the little black-and-white streak well out in front, taking a bee line toward the point two miles away; the red, yellow, black and brindled mongrel team straining in his wake. The loose-lead dog had taken a line slightly to the left of where Bob's team, a little jaded after their morning's run, loped along. Bob's team was giving a good account of itself, making good time; but Bob's dogs lacked the incentive that spurred Alec's team on to a faster and faster pace.

Skeen was off his sled, running at the front gee-pole, yelling like a fiend. Again and again his rawhide whip-lash cracked. Each time a dog yelped as a patch of hair flicked off his quarters, he dug his claws into the ice, and spurred ahead. But Alec was coming closer. His whiplash sang and popped, but did not sting. There was no need. His dogs had forgotten the weariness of the late forenoon. Imbued with a new idea, an absorbing object for their attainment just in front of them, they careened along, yelling like a wolf pack, splitting the wind as they chased the fox-terrier, who was dancing just ahead.

SKEEN WAS in a fury. He cursed and raved. He punished his wolfish team unmercifully. They scrambled to get away from their driver, turned devil, but there was no more in them. Alec's dogs drew up even with them. The two teams were racing neck and neck, the leaders abreast, and twenty feet apart.

A roar went up from the anxious spectators, lashing their own dogs to keep close in the rear. Their voices boomed across the ice.

"Go it, Bob, he's gainin' on you!"

"That's the tune, Alec! You've got him! Go on past him! Make him like it!"

"Whip those dogs, Bob, whip 'em." It was Mike, screaming. "Burn up those dogs! You quitlin' on me?"

On flew the racers, still even. Now Bob was on his knees on his sled, digging a short pick-pole into the ice and thrusting back with mighty lunges like a man poling a canoe up a rapid. He never stopped yelling and screaming at his team. At each thrust on the pick-pole his sled jumped forward like a boat breasting a wave. The sled-runners sang with a keen note. Bob was far from going to sleep. He struggled heroically to get more speed out of his team.

The partisans behind jumped up and down with excitement. They

bellowed with laughter and pointed at the little terrier tearing along in front of Alec's team.

"What do you think of Alec's lead-dog? Knows his stuff, don't he?" They yelled with laughter and appreciation.

Alec's team began to forge slowly ahead, amid renewed yells and roars from the followers. "Now's your chance, Alec! Pass him, pass him! His dogs are quittin'! Take a lead, take a lead!"

Alec did take a lead. The lead widened. With an access of renewed fury, Bob lashed and yelled like a maniac. He got a short-lived spurt out of his dogs, but it was not enough to close the lead. They slackened; practically quit. It was all Skeen could do even to keep them on their feet. Alec drew away, his lead widening at every jump.

As his dogs galloped away down the ice, Alec looked back, his face all one broad grin, and yelled, "Good bye, Bob! See you in camp when you get in tonight!"

"Go on, Alec, keep it up, boy. Don't wait for us. We'll see you later!" bellowed Joe. Nothing much worrying Joe now!

Bob Skeen kept on doing all he could to keep his dogs going. The thought of the consequences of Mike Isicroff's rage at his defeat kept him driving with all he had. He would keep on making a run for it the rest of the way, but when Alec reached the farther point all ready a half-mile in the lead, the little loose-lead dog careering along ahead, the other dogs still pursuing relentlessly, Bob, and Mike behind him, knew the race was over. The loose-lead dog had won.



TIME: The Thirties

PLACE: The South Seas

Bellow Bill Williams came upon that pearling lugger, drifting aimlessly, to find five dead men in her cabin—most of them without a mark upon them. It all suggested piracy, but how could pirates operate without a ship?

THE ATOLL OF FLAMING MEN

by RALPH R. PERRY

BELLOW BILL WILLIAMS used every sailor's trick he knew to reach the derelict before sunset. But he could not make a breeze, and the sun was low when he sighted the pearling lugger—hove-to,

as though there was a hand at the wheel, drifting slowly to leeward with a diver's lifeline and air hose angling over the side, as though the lugger was on the pearling grounds and the diver was walking along the bottom snatching up shell with both hands.

But this was not the pearling grounds. It was the open sea. If that diver was on the bottom he



was five hundred fathoms down. He wasn't, of course. He was twisting round and round at the end of that life line, drowned and dead, with a blue lace and popping eyes.

Something had made his ship-mates abandon him—suddenly. Even the most callous and brutal murderer would have hauled up that dangling body that was twisting slowly round and round—to dispose of its mute accusation, if for no other reason. And no partner will desert an air pump while he can move a finger.

Yet that something had not damaged the ship. She sailed on, though her bow was pointed toward no port in the South Seas. Behind her the sun, setting through cirrus clouds, streaked the sky with bright red knives and patches of scarlet. Jet-black against the sunset that revealed every rope and spar, the lugger drifted along alone.

Bellow Bill was alone. He was a big man, with a voice that boomed like surf. A curly-headed, blue-eyed pearly skipper; six foot three and broad as a door, tattooed from wrists to shoulders and waist to chin with designs that did not leave a square inch of him undecorated. He could say, as a simple matter of fact, that he had never met a stronger man. He could boast—which he did rarely, and only when he was very drunk—that he liked going where

other men wouldn't. He knew the South Seas from New Guinea to Papeete, and there were many scars in his tattooed hide, from bushmen's spears as well as white men's bullets.

But he did not want to board that lugger in the dark if he could help it. However, the sun dipped below the sea before he could bring his own schooner alongside, and the prompt darkness of the tropics left him no choice. A few stars were out when he hauled in the lifeline finding, as he had expected, a man at the end of it. Bill did not unscrew the lace plate. Time enough for that. He moved, with a reluctance that was pure instinct, toward the open companionway.

Though it was dark, he heard flies still buzzing below decks.

"Not storm, or the ship would be smashed up. Not pirates, or the crew would have died on deck," Bill rumbled in the booming voice, like the low notes of an organ or the mutter of distant surf, which had given him his nickname. He wanted at that moment to hear himself speak, for most clearly he realized what any sensible sailorman ought to do.

Slide the hatch on that companionway and lock it. Tow the lugger back to the nearest port, and turn her over as she was to the authorities for investigation. Runaloro, a small atoll that was

a pearler's rendezvous, was within three hours' sail. Why stick a nose into an ugly business that was no concern of his?

"Since when did that bother you? Get down there, you tattooed ape!" Bill growled at himself, and swung down the companionway — landing, for all his bulk, as lightly as a cat, with bent knees and doubled fists. He was expecting something out of the commonplace. But nevertheless . . .

"Hell's fire!" he roared.

AT FIRST GLANCE it seemed exactly that. In the pitch darkness of the cabin, scattered on the deck close to his feet, floating in mid-air as high as his waist, unearthly greenish lights glowed and waned, as breath comes and goes upon a window pane. Those points of chill green flame outlined faces in the dark — faces of three dead men.

Bill reached down. His groping fingers touched a naked shoulder, oily and cold. He started as though he had touched a snake, stepped carefully over the prone body, and with fingers that shook, lighted the hurricane lantern that swung over the table in the center of the cabin.

As the wick spluttered and caught, it revealed, not three corpses, but five. Seated in a chair facing Bill across the table was a young white man with blue eyes and sun-bleached hair. He was

handsome, and not over twenty-five.

The other four were all sprawled over the deck, and were natives. But — what made the muscles along Bill's back crawl — of the five, only one bore a visible wound. That it should be a relief to look at a man shot twice through the chest seemed strange, but it was a fact.

That was at least comprehensible — the rest was not.

Bellow Bill Williams reached for the fine-cut chewing tobacco that he carried loose in his hip pocket and filled his cheek. He could reconstruct the scene, up to a point. Beyond that even his vast knowledge of the *devil-devil* societies of Melanesian villages, which are founded and supported by murder and grisly superstitions, offered no parallel. Something here was new, and neither civilized nor savage, but the worst of both.

For the blond white man was bound in his chair. His right shoe had been ripped off. Scorched skin between his big and first toe, and the charred mark of a cigarette on the deck, was evidence of torture that had succeeded in its purpose.

For his last act had been to open a secret drawer cleverly concealed in the cabin table. Near his hand was a cloth bag in which pearls — big pearls and an astonishing number of them — nestled in a packing of kapok.

So far so good. Pearl pirates and torture. Ugly, but simple.

The native who had been shot had evidently been manning the air pump. He lay there where the impact of the bullets had knocked him, close to the foot of the companionway. That he had heard the noise when his skipper was attacked and rushed below, trusting to the reserve pressure in the pump to sustain the diver for a few minutes, was a simple guess.

Everything else was a headache. Three powerful and ugly-looking pearl pirates had been in complete control of the lugger after those shots were fired. Then they had died, suddenly. It was as though a giant hand had flung them in three different directions away from the table. And there wasn't so much as a pin scratch on any of them, for Bellow Bill looked with grim care.

PUZZLE NUMBER TWO was that the pirates had smeared their faces with some queer stuff that glowed greenish in the dark. It had been wet at the time, for it was curling away from their skin now in strips.

The deck was littered with broken bits of the stuff. It was translucent and curled up at the edges like a thin sheet of dried gelatine. They hadn't come aboard with that stuff on their faces. The greenest pearling skipper would

not have let such visitors on his lugger. And where was the boat they'd come in, anyhow?

Bellow Bill gave that one up, too. He put the bag of pearls in his pocket, and searched for the lugger's log. There wasn't any. There wasn't even a letter or ship's clearance papers to identify the dead skipper, and there wasn't anything in his pockets except a package of cigarettes and the broken half of a sixpence with a hole drilled through it so that it could be worn around the neck. English sailors frequently break a sixpence and give the other half to a girl.

The murdered deck hand wore a crescent-shaped piece of green glass—probably the bottom of a beer bottle with the edges smoothed by being tumbled about by the waves on some beach—thrust into the elongated lobe of his right ear. Which wasn't much of a means of identification, either.

The men with smeared faces wore nothing but *lava heires*, and a Melanesian doesn't remove his amulet unless he's under the protection of some boss devil. He believes too implicitly in too many evil spirits. Of the three, one had a skull that came almost to a point under the frizzled, kinky hair. Someone at Runaloro might know who Pointed Skull was.

Or might not, or might be afraid to say. There would be no British Resident on so small an atoll. Prob-

ably no official at all; and the lack of a log book — which could hardly have been destroyed by the pirates — was as startling to a sailor like Bellow Bell as the cold green light that had illuminated the faces of the corpses.

Pearlmen were careless, but not that careless.

Bill shifted his quid. The face of the blond young Englishman, staring at him rigidly from across the narrow table, had a mute and desperate appeal. It was a decent, likable face. *I held out as long as I could*, it seemed to say. *They were a slimy gang, and they jumped me so suddenly I didn't know what to expect.*

"Lad, you got nothing on me," Bill rumbled aloud. "I don't know what to expect, either, but I'm carrying on." He grinned, and into his blue eyes came dancing golden flecks. He smelled bawle, and long odds, and a wily, diabolical enemy.

The prospect appealed to him. "But I think, fella," he remarked in the straightforward tone that he might have used to a living man, "that I'd better not work along normal lines, either. There's so many queer slants in this that I'm going to put in a few more.

2

HE BEGAN by closing the secret compartment in the table

and putting the bag of pearls in their kapok packing in his pocket. Next he cut the lashings that bound the dead Englishman, but left him sitting in his chair.

Finally he went on deck, threw the lashings overboard, disconnected and coiled the lifeline and air line, and carried the diver down to the cabin. Bill left the corpse, still in its suit, sitting on the deck with its back against the forward bulkhead. When he left the cabin he closed but did not lock the companionway slide.

On deck, after this was done, the lugger looked normal in every respect. Below decks — Bill's neck crawled at the memory of what the first person to go below would see. He planned, moreover, that that person would be utterly unprepared for the sight, and he had removed everything that gave a reasonable explanation of those glowing, scabrous corpses.

What in hell made that cold green fire, anyhow? Why were the faces smeared with such stuff? Bill chewed over that all through the night, while he sailed toward Run-aloro with the lugger in tow.

The distance was not great. In the dark hour before dawn, when sleep is deepest and men suddenly awakened are least likely to have their wits about them, he made out the white line of the surf on the reef of the atoll. It was a half mile or so ahead. The land itself he

could not see, and even in the starlight his schooner and the lugger behind it would be invisible to the keenest eyes ashore. Bellow Bill Williams grinned like a small boy about to play a particularly startling practical joke.

He hove-to, boarded the lugger again, and trimmed the sails and lashed the wheel so that the lugger moved slowly ahead. As it gathered way he dove overboard and swam back to his own schooner, but the lugger sailed on in the gentle breeze.

No hand on the helm . . . a crew of corpses in the cabin, three of them with faces that flamed . . . he could still call to mind a vivid picture of the face of the native with the pointed skull. The lugger would crash on the reef, of course, and the population of the atoll would come to examine the wreck. If those who had guilty knowledge could keep a poker face in that cabin they were superhuman.

Grinning, Bill swung over the rail and picked a pair of binoculars from the rack. They were the best glasses in the South Seas. Their previous owner had waited at the top of a shaft, with a gun and a pack of dingoes, for Bill to climb to the surface. That had been a narrow squeak, but those glasses gathered every faint glimmer of light, and seemed to bring the line of surf within a hundred yards.

Bill watched the lugger sailing on, saw it strike with a crash that must be audible on shore, which was to leeward, though he could not hear it. He waited for a lantern or torch to appear on the inner beach.

Waited . . . and waited. After a half hour the sky commenced to pale. The lugger, pounding gently on the coral, had only swung broadside to the reef. The thing was unnatural. Those men ashore were nine-tenths of them sailors. The crash of a hull against the reef would certainly have awakened some of them. Could they *all* be in a drunken stupor?

No—for suddenly the lugger began to move! Suddenly the bow turned into the wind, which was a job for a powerful boat's crew. Ghostlike, the sails shifted and the lugger moved again toward the open sea. Not a pinpoint of light had shown until then, but suddenly there was a red glow. Not on the lugger's deck, but in the cabin. A curl of flame that licked through a seam, caught on a tarred rope and twisted up the rigging.

WITH AN OATH Bill dropped his glasses and got his schooner under way, but the fire had been set far too well for him to have any chance of getting alongside and extinguishing it. Within minutes that twist of flame became a column that roared upward

through an *open* companionway. Sails blazed and fell in a shower of sparks, lighting the sea so that Bill's schooner was revealed.

He sailed as close to the lugger as he dared, as though he were trying to give aid or effect a rescue, but even he did not care to board. Grins-faced, swearing under his breath, he hove-to until fire was gushing from every hatch and port-hole, until it was obvious that the lugger was going to burn to the water's edge and then sink to the bottom because of the weight of her ballast. The water off the reef was deep—too deep to recover even a charred body.

"Someone was damned wide awake, and able to get plenty of help," Bill rumbled. "Well—what made you think this was going to be simple, you damned fool?"

He steered his schooner toward the entrance to the harbor. There were lanterns and toches moving along the beach now—plenty of them. As he entered the lagoon he noted that there were many of the dugouts and outriggers used by native skin-divers in pearl fishing, but no luggers or schooners that would presumably belong to white men.

He dropped anchor. "Ahoy!" he sung out in his enormous voice. Far away a bird, roused by that stentorian hail, squawked an answer. "Did the crew of that lugger swim ashore all right? I

was cruising by, and no one left her at sea."

On the beach there was a long pause. Lanterns and torches drew together.

"What crew?" a man's voice shouted back in English that was slightly but curiously and definitely accented. It was as deep a bass voice as Bill's own, and he could not place the singsong accent. It was not Chinese, nor Australian, nor native.

"The crew of that burning lugger, of course!" Bill boomed. "What ship was that, and who owned her?"

"How do we know? Didn't you see the name on her stern?"

"Painted out," roared Bill. "Hell, man, didn't you recognize her? She sailed from your lagoon, didn't she?"

A pause. A very brief pause while the owner of that bass voice filled his lungs.

"Why, no. She was skirting the reef when we caught sight of the fire," he said. "We thought you'd pick them all up, or we'd have been out in outriggers. Didn't even one of 'em get clear?"

"Nary man. Blind drunk, I guess," Bill shouted cheerfully. In the dark his head, with its thatch of curly blond hair, canted to one side. Oh, yeah? Skirting the reef, hey? That guy ashore had the gail of a Liverpool monkey.

And—not one voice on the

crowded beach was raised to protest that amazingly brazen lie! Did they take Bill for a simple sailor who happened to be cruising past Runaloro? Or did they guess pretty accurately at what he was? They must have seen that someone had carried that diver in his suit down into the cabin after the strange massacre . . .

BELLOW BILL WILLIAMS grinned in the darkness. Any sensible sailor in his position would slip his anchor chain and get out of that harbor as fast as the wind would carry him. Better to lose your anchor than take a chance on your schooner and your life. Instead Bill prepared to go ashore. His only preparations were to slip a revolver into his right hip pocket and put on a belt.

The gun, though loaded and in perfect order, was a decoy. Bellow Bill was a rotten shot, perfectly capable of missing a man with all six bullets at any range greater than fifteen feet. Of course, most practical revolver shooting is done at less than fifteen-foot ranges, and when a man carries a gun that is the weapon which strangers watch. Bellow Bill actually relied upon his strength and his startling and unexpected speed.

A two-hundred-and-forty-pound man ought to be slow, and by the same token a lion ought to be slower than a jackal. But isn't.

And Bill's belt, though it looked merely like a wide and thick affair of leather, was specially made of flat two-inch links of steel, covered with thin kidskin. The links were studded, so that they would never tangle or kink. The studs were solid gold—part of a cargo of Spanish gold that Bill had raised from the coral where it had lain hidden for centuries. A grateful young man and his fiancée who had learned what a terrible weapon a length of chain was in Bellow Bill's hand had given him that belt. Five pounds of steel, two pounds of gold, and a heavy square-edge buckle that would cut as well as crush. Bill patted the buckle, touched the bag of pearls, the broken shilling, and the native amulet of glass in his pockets, and paddled ashore. He was chewing tobacco slowly as he sauntered into the light of the torches and lanterns on the beach. He looked like a big, gently, slow-witted bull chewing placidly on the cud.

"How are we going to report the loss to the authorities if we don't know the lugger's name, huh?" he complained.

He addressed the only other white man present among that crowd of nearly a score of natives merely because the man was white, and so, by South Seas etiquette, the leader. But from the first instant Bill's attention was on three other men.

They were as alike as three black vultures. Tall, powerful statues in ebony, with muscles corded on their folded arms and naked chests, who stood in the rear of the crowd, and yet dominated it.

To encounter twins who are full-grown and cannot be told apart is rare enough. These men were triplets. The same hooked nose, the same thin lips, the same jutting, craggy eyebrows. Only in the way they wore their hair was there a difference. The men on the right and left had the drizzled topknot of Melanesian savages, but he in the center sported a shaven skull. Three vultures — one bald-headed.

Bellow Bill licked his lips. The mystery remained, but he had come face-to-face with his enemy.

The white man in front of him, meanwhile, was thrusting out a dirty hand. Mechanically Bill grasped it.

"I'm Owsley, the trader," the man was mouthing in a slurred tenor voice. "Titus Owsley — Titus by name, and tighes' by nature." He laughed shrilly at his own pun. "The drunks' trader south of the equator. Neve' been north of the equator. Can't say about that, but bet I'm the tighes'. Come have a drink. Lagger burned . . . forget lagger, eh? 'Ave drink . . ."

HE WAS shaking like jelly, and he was drunk, very drunk,

no doubt of that. His eyes swam in the flickering torchlight. He breathed hard, so that his cotton singlet, soaked with sweat, clung tight to his sagging belly. Yet it was not liquor that made him quiver, but fear too abject for alcohol to drown.

In the blurred and swimming eyes Bellow Bill read the panic-stricken realization that they were two white men surrounded by a score who were pressing closer.

"Drink?" boomed Bellow Bill. "Say, that's the word I want to hear!" He slapped the trader mightily on a soft, sweat-soaked shoulder, and as Owsley staggered back he cleared elbow room for Bill in that pressing crowd.

"Have you got a bottle?" Bill rumbled. He saw the neck of one sticking from Owsley's pocket. "No man can say he's the best in the South Seas till he's drunk with me."

He took the bottle, which was a good three-quarters full of gin, and gripped the neck in his teeth. For the first few swallows he steadied the bottle with his hand. Then, still biting on the bottle neck, he hooked both thumbs in his belt near the buckle. Slowly his head went back. Swallow by swallow, steadily, the gin disappeared. With a twist of his head Bill flipped an empty bottle onto the sand.

"Can you match that?" he rumbled.

His eyes were on the face of the vulture with the bald head. The crowd murmured. They eased back, waiting for Bill to stagger . . . they would wait without seeing it . . . but not a muscle of that powerful face changed. He was wondering whether Bill would be easier to seize when that prodigious drink had time to take effect. Only that, and Bill knew it.

"Gotta have another bottle," Bill growled. "Got it at your gdown, I suppose?"

"Y-yes," chattered Owsley.

He started to turn away, but Bill gave him a powerful, seemingly negligent shove toward the three silent men. At that moment neither white man could have turned his back on the crowd and lived to walk ten yards.

"Wait—we got to have a light!" Bill roared.

He thrust himself forward and snatched the torch nearest the three, but it was not the flaming stick of wood that he wanted.

On the dark and muscular arm of the man with the shaven head was a fleck of something that gleamed coldly, even when the torchlight did not fall upon it.

Deliberately Bellow Bill picked it from the dark skin. His knuckles, as he held it, were less than a foot below the big man's jaw.

"What's this?" he roared drunkenly—and waited. If it was to be a fight for his life he could

knock out the triplets before the crowd closed in.

"A fish scale, isn't it?" replied a bass voice in English. The folded arms never stirred.

"Of course! Sure it's a fish scale!" Bill whooped. He snapped the little fleck of gleaming stuff away with a contemptuous thumb. It was not a fish scale, and he knew it as well as that staring, uncertain crowd. "Well—good fishing. Come on, Owsley; let's get that drink!"

He seized the trader's arm and strode away, swinging the torch over his head. Gage of battle had been offered, and declined. For a moment or two it was safe for a white man on Runaloro to turn his back.

3

OWSLEY GUIDED him past a deserted bungalow to a shed of sheet iron, and unfastened the padlock on the door. The heat of the air inside the place made Bill gasp. It was wet and hot as a steam-pit. Behind him a bar was slid to bolt the door. Owsley lit a candle, and crossed the room like a panting dog to paw for a bottle of gin.

Bill reached for the water jar and drank deep to stop his head from spinning. Three-quarters of a bottle had been a terrific dose even for his huge frame and iron head.

He wiped his lips and moved to unfasten a shutter to get air.

"For God's sake, no!" Owsley squealed. "They've followed us. They are outside now—with spears, arrows, bullets! I haven't dared open a window after dark for weeks!"

"Have they got any way to kill a man without leaving a mark?" Bill rumbled.

The watery, terrified eyes of the trader rolled in bewilderment.

"No?" Bill purred. "Now, that's interesting. Who's they?"

"Arano, Buno, and Coaro!" It was a chant of despair.

"The Black Alphabet, eh?" Bill purred. "Those are Melanesian names, but a savage mama doesn't know her A B C's mister. There's a white man's brain behind that."

"No!" Owsley denied, and gulped raw trade spirits. "I—I didn't name them. I swear it. I've been sweating here for weeks waiting to be speared. They—*they've taken my guns away!* What did you come ashore for? Were you crazy? Couldn't you see that you were going to get us both speared? I tell you they're waiting outside for either of us to show our faces!"

"Sure," Bellow Bill agreed emphatically. "About twenty of them, aren't there? That makes Runaloro ninety-five per cent black, and five per cent pure yellow. Ain't

there any Dutch courage in that gin you swill?"

Owsley flushed.

"He can still get mad," Bill rumbled in a tone of wonder, as though he were speaking to himself. "Maybe he ain't the biggest coward south of the equator." And in a harder voice, "Well, mister? *I've* seen—too much since sunset. What do *you* know about tonight?"

"I—I heard the lugger strike. But I didn't unlock the door. Till Arano came and ordered me to come out. You were sailing into the lagoon..."

"Why didn't you unlock the door?"

"Because I knew the Flaming Men must be at work!" Owsley yammered in despair. "God, don't look at me like that! What can one unarmed man do against twenty? They paint their faces with some kind of devilish stuff that burns cold and green..."

"That stuff is phosphorus from the heads of common kitchen matches, I've figured," Bellow Bill remarked calmly. "Only it's mixed with some kind of seaweed jelly—agar-agar, for a guess—that keeps it moist and makes it last. It's the *devil-devil* magic of a Melanesian secret society. Witch doctors are getting up-to-date these days. But—damn your yellow soul—can't you see that the jelly stuff is beyond a savage's brain?"

"Arano was educated by missionaries," Owsley explained sullenly. "He comes from Malitia. The island that's so savage it's never been thoroughly explored."

BELLOW BILL had been farther into the interior of Malitia than any exploring party. He remembered a tribe dancing around a headless corpse, roasting slowly before the embers of vast fires. He had run for his life down the bed of a jungle creek. No doubt at all that Malitia was savage . . . He kept a poker face.

"The idea was that Arano could do missionary work where a white preacher couldn't stay alive," Owsley droned, pitifully eager to explain his own surrender. "But he said there was no money in that. He's the one with the shaved skull. He came here and offered me ten pounds sterling a week for a partnership in my trading station. He was going to do all the work, too. I—I could just sit on my veranda and drink, and go to Sydney once a year to buy the supplies. Ten pounds was twice what I was clearing myself. It looked to me like a jolly deal, all round. Runaloro is a small atoll, and isolated. There's practically no copra. But why shouldn't I take his money while it lasted?"

There was a hint of aggressiveness and defiance in the swimming, drunken eyes. Bellow Bill nodded.

What he thought to himself was, *You besotted fool . . . couldn't you see that all Arano wanted was a white man at a front?*

"He paid the ten pounds every week," the slurred, drunken voice droned on. "But he never even tried to gather copra. His two brothers arrived. Bupo and Coaro. Plain, uneducated, unwashed savages. He didn't fish hard for pearls, either. The lagoon here was fished out long before my time, of course, but he said he'd found a new, rich, untouched virgin bed off the reef. He's paid my ten pounds every week, so I guess he did . . ."

"You lie! You dirty murdering coward, you *lie*!" snarled Bellow Bill under his breath. "I can see the whole scheme now, by God! Guess, do you? *The rumor of the richness of the new pearl beds at Runaloro has gone all over the South Seas!* What do you think brought me sailing here? What will bring every other pearler that's a free agent and not tied to one spot by fishing grounds he's leased? What but the hope of a pearl bed that *isn't* fished out—grounds where a man can bring up a hundred pounds in an afternoon, like in the old days. Why, all the free-lance pearlers—all the little fellows that are broke and ready to take a chance—are sailing to this out-of-the-way, God-forsaken atoll. One by one they

come, as the rumor reaches them and they act on it! Guess, do you? *How many luggers have come to Runaloro this season?*"

Bellow Bill was too strong a man to lose his temper often, but at the look on his face, the sudden taloning of his tattooed hands, Owsley squealed and twisted into the farthest corner of the shed, with both fat arms thrown up to protect his throat.

"Ten, so far! You make eleven," he gasped. "But God help me, I didn't dare warn them. I tried to drink myself unconscious as soon as I sighted their topsails, for if I warned them the three would have painted their faces with fire and come for me! They'd have eaten me, Captain. It isn't just death—it's knowing I'd be *eaten*. I'd sit here without a gun, and in the dark they'd hammer down the door. Those green, flaming faces would peer in, and then . . ."

SHUDDERING, shrinking from Bill, Owsley started to crawl across the floor on hands and knees. His objective was the bottle. "You're right. *There's no new pearl bed been found at all*," he whispered. "Arano and Buno and Coaro are pearl pirates without a ship, and every man on this island but me is in cahoots with them. They paddle up to the pearlers that come into the harbor and make friends with them like any

other natives, and then they turn on them suddenly.

"Every lugger that comes has a partial load of shell that's been fished elsewhere, and a few pearls tucked away in a bag somewhere. I knew what was going on, but I never heard them at work and saw them burn a lugger before. Now they'll eat us, I tell you! We're both as good as dead men!"

"Shut up!" Bill growled.

Pirates—without a ship! It was a scheme appallingly novel. It was no wonder he had been baffled by the queer slant it gave everything on that lugger of dead men.

The pirates had painted their faces after they had boarded and captured the lugger, for instance.

And yet in spite of its novelty, it was a scheme as old as tribal murder in the South Seas. It was the overlay of an education on a savage mentality, the transfer of the customs of the deep jungle to salt water, that made the scheme so deadly. For in the jungle human heads are wealth. Every village builds man-traps on its paths and roads to slay the unwary stranger.

Arano had merely arranged a trap to catch ships and white men, and terrorized the natives of the atoll into acting as his executioners with painted faces of cold green flame.

Regretfully Bellow Bill thought of the rifles and the dynamite aboard his schooner. They might

as well be on the moon. Yet he could not blame himself for failing to imagine that an atoll might be transformed into a pirate ship.

"Arano won't trust me any more, now that I've talked to you alone," Owsley was moaning. "You bluffed him on the beach, but he'll settle with both of us now."

Owsley, Bill thought contemptuously, was nothing but a lump of quivering fat, useless for any purpose. Not guilty of any crime himself. Merely totally lacking in courage. The pearler reached for fine-cut, shrugged, and strode to a shuttered window. He peered out through a crack in the boards.

Arano had certainly decided to sweep the atoll of white men. At the edge of a small clearing that surrounded the godown, close to the ground, were six severed heads.

Though they were painted with phosphorus, the features were indistinguishable. But one of the heads had a pointed skull that was unmistakable. Here was what left of the crew of the lugger, and the pirates who had attempted to capture it.

Attempted, and failed — which was queer. A white man bound in his chair had killed them instantly, leaving no mark upon them.

"Who was the skipper of the lugger that was burned tonight?" Bill rumbled.

"Fella named Shaunessy.

Claimed to be a pearler, but he talked too educated," Owsley muttered. "His sister wouldn't even let me speak to her."

"Sister?" roared Bill. "Where is she?" He crossed to the cowering trader and kicked him viciously. "D'ye mean to say there's a white girl on this atoll and you've kept your slobbering trap shut about her?"

OWSLEY'S FACE was covered with his arms, but the head nodded. "Left a sister and a houseboy when he sailed for the pearl bed," he muttered. "They're holed up, like us, in a bungalow a couple of hundred yards farther down the beach. What was the use of talking?" he ended with a whine. "We'll never get out of here alive ourselves."

"I'd never get a girl aboard my schooner alive, and that's a fact."

The sudden disappearance of anger from his voice surprised the trader into lifting a face from the protection of his arms. This huge, tattooed pearler spoke calmly, almost as though he were amused. He stood with his thumbs hooked in the square steel buckle of his belt, staring into space with eyes that seemed to dance and gleam in the candlelight. Anyone who knew Bellow Bill would have recognized that look as the prelude to an act utterly reckless, but to

the trader the expression seemed to be one of hope.

"You think—you and I could . . ."

"Why, sure." Bill was forced to rely upon a drunken coward for help. As he stood there he was planning tactics in which drunkenness and cowardice would be helpful. "Sure-ly," he rumbled. "Or at least, you can. That is, you can if you've got some of that native cord that's twisted out of coconut fiber in the store. Rope won't do. It's too strong."

"I've got some coir!" Owsley replied eagerly. He went swaying and staggering in search of it. While his back was turned, Bellow Bill pulled out his revolver, snapped all the cartridges from the cylinder, and put back one, returning the other five to his pocket. He turned the cylinder so that the trigger had to be pulled five times before the gun would fire.

Owsley, pawing in a box, never looked up until he straightened with a length of coir in his hand—half-inch, strong-looking rope, but actually only a quarter as strong as manila. Bellow Bill drew his revolver again, and laid in on the table.

"Right now Arano figures to cook you, all right, and why not?" he remarked coolly. "All you've ever done for him is deep your mouth shut—because you was scared to open it. That ain't

enough. But if you were to walk me out of here, bound, and at the point of my own gun, you'd prove yourself the kind of Judas he admires. And you'd be saving him a lot of trouble. While he was dealing with me you could slip off to my schooner. Slip the anchor and trim the sheets—and none of the dugouts can catch you.

BILL'S EYES twinkled as he watched the idea sink slowly into the drink-sodden mind.

"You mean—you want me to pretend to tie you, so you can run for it, too?" Owsley whispered.

"No," Bill contradicted. He extended his elbows behind his back. "You tie me up good and tight. Nothing phony about the knots at all. The girl and I are as good as cooked anyway, understand? But you sail to Sydney and tell them what you know, and the British will send a gunboat. That will square my account with Arano."

"The murderin' devil!" breathed Owsley piously.

He advanced with the cord, and drew Bill's elbows behind his back—as tightly as Bill would let him. Which looked as tight as possible, though it left the pearler a precious half-inch of slack.

Bill grinned as Owsley tied the knots—carefully and well. Those rough brown cords looked too thick for human strength to part.

Actually, if you were abnormally strong and knew the trick of arching your back and adding the expansion of your ribs to the jerk of your arms, they could be broken in a second.

Bellow Bill meant to wait until Arano was within arm's reach. Natives who have seen their leader killed before their eyes never fight well.

Owsley picked up the revolver.

"Damn you! You double-crossing . . ." Bill roared suddenly in his enormous voice.

"I'll shoot!" Owsley squealed with a convincingsness far beyond Bill's hopes. "Lie down, you big hellion!"

The pearler dropped heavily to his knees. They waited, holding their breath, until he nodded at the door. Owsley threw back the wooden bolt and flung the door wide open. The candle flickered, and a shaft of light leaped out into the darkness. Bill was slowly rising to his knees. Owsley, in his excitement, was jabbing him with the gun.

"I've got him—I got him!" he shrieked.

"Good!" said a deep voice from the shadows. "You'll be a man yet. Bring him out."

Bellow Bill stepped through the doorway. Instantly something tightened around his ankles and jerked both feet from under him.

He was being hauled along the ground by half a dozen men before he realized that a noose had caught him. It was so sudden that Owsley did not even click the revolver. The pearler was dragged across the clearing and through a fringe of bush toward a tall figure that loomed huge in the darkness.

"Avast hauling!" Arano shouted. "Keep that line tight! Don't let him get up! Buno—Coaro—see if he has those pearls!"

As his brothers walked toward Bill, who was squirming helplessly on the ground, Arano laughed aloud. He had not moved. He was still in the fringe of bushes from which he had kept watch on the shed.

"I told you all he would have to come out of that door!" he gloated aloud. "Though I expected him on the run, shooting. Tie his feet when you get the pearls, Buno, and then we will all paint our faces!"

4

THE DISASTER was so sudden and complete that Owsley failed to react. Bellow Bill, peering upward, saw him still standing in the lighted doorway, with the wobbling revolver pointed at nothing in particular. Which was lucky, for if he had fired and the gun had clicked harmlessly, Arano seemed to be a leader quick

enough of wit to shoot Bill as he lay.

The pearly roared like a hobbled bull. He seemed to struggle desperately to get to his feet—with the result that the natives still holding the rope dragged him a yard or two farther toward the two big men who came swaggering toward him with drawn knives. He seemed to struggle—but did not.

Even in that horrible instant when his feet were jerked from beneath him, Bill had restrained the impulse to snap his bonds. He lay on his back, kicking and roaring profanity—and actually waiting, with cold and grim detachment, for both of the advancing brothers to get within arm's reach. He might be able to take the two to hell with him.

That was all he hoped for—and that, apparently, was too much. Even in triumph the brothers were wary. Buno walked up, kicked Bill in the ribs, and squatted beside him. Coaro remained standing and leaned over his brother's back. A hand thrust roughly into Bill's trouser pocket grasped the bag of pearls and jerked. The pocket ripped as the big black fist came out with the loot, and . . .

Buno uttered a coughing, strangled gasp. He swayed on his heels and clutched at his throat with both hands, the bag of pearls slipping through his fingers. Bill caught a whiff of a sharp and bitter

odor. Low as his head was, the effect was as though a huge rotten peach were jammed over his mouth and nose and pressed there by the hand of a giant. He could not breathe, and with senses that suddenly reeled he fought to keep from breathing.

His nostrils were low. But the pungent, biting, deadly gas burst from the pearl bag close to Buno's face, and as Buno toppled forward Coaro leaned down to discover what the matter was. He must have drawn one deep breath of the gas. That was more than enough. He fell across his brother's body.

Bill snapped his bonds with a surge of strength born of the terror of a death that would come with a single breath. He snatched at the knife Coaro had dropped, and slashed blindly at the rope as he rolled over and over along the ground—anything to get even a foot farther away from that bag of pearls.

The natives were dragging him. That helped. Arano was shooting as fast as he could pull trigger. Sand showered Bill as the bullets whacked the earth all around him. He didn't care. He'd take a bullet rather than raise his head—yet. That damned stuff seemed to rise, and even in the open air a circle of death was spreading around the two big bodies whose collapse must have seemed like magic to Arano. Once he whiffed the

peach-like odor he would recognize, hydrocyanic acid gas, and run. Bill's knife cut the last strand of the rope, but he kept on rolling.

"Back!" Arano screamed—at natives who wanted to do nothing so much as run. A huge tattooed giant was rolling at them with a knife that glimmered in the faint light from the open door. An enormous, fearless enemy who had left two corpses behind him that he had not touched with his hands.

"Run for the beach!" Arano yelled. "Don't let him get to his ship!"

BILL CURSED the missionaries who had trained the brain under that shaven skull. That order saved him, for the moment; but had the positions been reversed he would have given it himself. It would keep Arano master of the atoll in the end—and never was an order obeyed more enthusiastically. With howls of fright the natives bolted for the beach.

"Owsley!" Bill bellowed.

No answer. The trader had also taken to his heels. Bill rolled through the fringe of brush, thrust his face against the good clean earth, and dared to draw a breath. The air was fresh. He leaped up and ran toward the interior of the atoll. The Shaunessy girl was in a bungalow a couple of hundred yards farther down the beach, Owsley had said.

Bill pounded along in the darkness under the palm trees until he found it. Not a gleam of light showed, but after the yelling and the shooting a girl and a house-boy must be awake inside, alert for a glimpse of an enemy. And they would be armed.

"Ahoy! I'm a friend!" Bill rumbled. He walked forward, acutely aware that his white ducks would make him visible. If the girl didn't believe him it would be just too bad, but he had no time to waste in identifying himself. The night must be nearly gone. Dawn in the tropics is as abrupt as sunset. At dawn Arano, with rifles and dynamite and over a dozen men, could easily mop him up.

The door of the bungalow swung open. Not a sound, not a word—only an oblong patch of deeper darkness. For Bellow Bill to step through it was to put his head in the lion's mouth, but the boards of the veranda creaked under his weight as he strode on with unfaltering steps.

"Good tactics!" he rumbled approvingly—and, as he entered, he stopped short. He was expecting the touch of cold steel. The revolver muzzle that was jabbed against his side was almost a relief—but at that instant there was a rustle of leaves and a hiccough from the clearing behind him.

Close to Bill two people caught their breath. That sound hinted at

treachery. For all those two knew he had come ahead to clear the way for a charge, and the gun that touched him quivered as the hand that held it shook, uncertain whether to pull the trigger or not.

"Come in here, Owsley—damn your yellow soul!" Bill said. He was calm—the least show of excitement and he'd be a dead man. "He's nothing but a tool of Arano's, I think, Miss Shaunessy," Bill added. "Not quite innocent, but altogether innocuous, eh? I think so. Me, I'm different. I got a bit of bottle glass and a broken sixpence in my pocket."

The gun trembled. Across the room the unseen girl caught her breath.

"You—know what became of my brother?" she said.

There are voices that give a clear picture of the speaker. Hers was one. It was clear, imperious, and afraid. She would be a tall girl, self-confident, a girl brought up in a big family of boys, who knew men and liked them. Bellow Bill thanked his lucky stars, for this was no time for a clinging vine or hysterics.

"Yes. He was a brave man," he answered, and let that simple statement announce Shaunessy's death. "He saved my life."

"I saw the flames—and guessed." She spoke quietly. Only a tremor in the tone told of grief,

like a harp string plucked and instantly muted. "When? B-before he died?"

"Afterward. With those pearls he carried."

"There was nothing strange about those pearls."

"You're wrong," Bill rumbled. "Among them were some little bulbs of compressed hydrocyanic gas that could be broken with the fingers—or a careless fist—if necessary. Did he tell you the case was as dangerous as that?"

"He asked me not to come. But I'd gone with him everywhere before. I insisted. It was just a routine trip. The Commissioner at Thursday Island sent us to officiate at the new pearling beds. A white girl is safe anywhere . . ."

"With black men or white. This atoll's neither," Bill contradicted. "When did you arrive?"

"Yesterday. He told me to be careful and watch the trader. We couldn't conceive how a sot like Owsley . . ."

"That's still outside, afraid to go ahead or back," Bill grunted. "Say, tell your boy to take this gun out of my ribs, will you? We're wasting time."

"His name is Evisht. I'm Oreen Shaunessy."

"Thanks. Bill Williams—Below Bill—talking. And if we ain't off the atoll by dawn we're all long pig. How much time have I got?"

ACROSS THE ROOM the radium dial of a wrist watch flashed as Oreen twisted her arm.

"It's twenty after five."

"That leaves thirty-five minutes, about," Bill estimated swiftly. "And what weapons have you got—outside of the peashooter Evishi is still jabbing me in the side with?"

"Another revolver that I was pointing at you. You can put yours down, Evishi," Oreen ordered crisply. "They are both .32s."

"I'm an American, so nothing under a .45 seems to me like a gun," Bill rumbled. His voice had a taut, gay lilt to match the reckless gleam in his eyes. "It doesn't much matter. I'm a rotten shot, and I was hoping for dynamite . . ."

He dropped his voice to a low growl that was not exactly a whisper, yet which did not carry outside the four walls. "Owsley is afraid to go, or stay. He's useless—understand? And a real man in his shoes would have died days ago."

"I . . ."

"Listen!" Bill purred. His mind was racing. "I'm a good man in a fight, and I ain't bragging . . . But—thirty-four minutes now to get rid of nearly twenty men? It can't be done with .32s. . . . That Arano hasn't lost a trick yet. He thinks like a whop, and because the man who holds my schooner

is master of the island, that's where he'll be now. I'm not underestimating him again. He is waiting for dawn—and he's so right I can feel my head lifting off my shoulders."

"Are you trying to frighten me?"

"You aren't that kind . . . I'm thinking out loud and counting on your nerve, girl. I'm hoping you'll see the answer as I see it. We can wait here and put up a swell scrap. In about—er—fifty minutes from now we get dynamited out with my own powder, damn it! If we're still livin' we watch Arano paint his face with green fire and settle down to enjoy himself with us."

"Or else inside of thirty-three minutes I've got to cut a quick-thinking devil out from among his men. If I can get Arano I can handle the rest. I've got to get him alone on the schooner—and he's too smart to be alone. That is, unless . . ."

Bellow Bill stopped short. In the perfect silence he could hear Oreen's wrist watch tick.

"I—see," she whispered. "You—you do rely on my courage, don't you? But—if I succeeded, could you? You and Evishi—he's only a boy—against twenty?"

"And Owsley," Bill purred with grim relish. "I aim to use Owsley, and how. Yeah, I can try. What's an extra half hour of livin' while

you wait for the butcher? My way we both take the greatest gamble there is!"

"I want to see your face," said Oreen suddenly. She struck a match, and with the same motion snapped it out. Bill glimpsed a face with the clean-cut line that marks the thoroughbred. She was pretty. An English blonde who is pretty stops a man's breath. In darkness she crossed the bungalow floor. A slim hand groped for his own and pressed it firmly.

"You like the idea of fight," she whispered. "That's what I wanted to see! And so do I—so do I, Bill! You're on."

"Let's go," he said, and shouldered toward the door. She checked him.

"Have you any of the pearls my brother prepared for a desperate gamble like this?" she asked quietly.

"Not in my pocket, but I reckon the bag's still lying on a dead man's chest," Bill purred. "Think you could look at your brother's face again? It's there."

She caught her breath. She knew that Bill had avoided saying, "Your brother's head."

"I know I can," she answered. "I'd feel safer, later, if I had one of his special pearls in my mouth."

"Aye, aye," Bill admitted. "A quick poison is an antidote against Arano's devilment, sure enough.

We've a half hour. We'll stop at the clearing and pick some up. But first . . ."

He strode out of the door and across the veranda.

"Hey—Owsley!" he called sharply. The trader came shambling forward in the dark, and Below Bill swung back his right fist. The blow landed on the button, as force nicely calculated. Owsley dropped as though he were pole-axed. Bill swung his limp figure over one huge shoulder.

"He won't know nothing for at least ten minutes," he rumbled with a reckless zest. "And that's the point of my whole scheme. Step along, Oreen. We'll gamble with split seconds for a chance to make a real fight."

5

IN THE EAST the stars had lost their brilliancy, and though the night seemed as dark as ever, dawn was not a quarter-hour away. On the beach near the harbor entrance a huge fire had been lit, and its yellow glare sparkled on the little waves that roughened the surface of the lagoon save when a huge black shadow leaped from shore to shore as one of Arano's sentinels walked in front of the blaze.

The shaven-headed pirate had planned shrewdly. Every dugout on the atoll capable of facing the

sea had been shifted close to the fire, with a dozen men to guard them, and over the rail of Bill's schooner an occasional green glimmer, like the flash of a distant firefly, marked other lookouts whose faces were already painted in preparation for an early, easy triumph.

The tide was on the ebb. The schooner's bowprit pointed inland, and in the stillness Bellow Bill could hear the thump and rattle of the main sheet blocks as a puff of breeze caught the sail, which he had left hoisted, but free to swing. He was alone, and unarmed unless his belt be counted arms. His chest heaved from a sprint under the coco palms that had brought him half way around the lagoon. He belied across the beach, his eyes on the paling stars, and crawled into the water unheard, and unseen.

An instant later a large mass of seaweed started drifting away from the beach at the point where he had disappeared. It moved with the tide, yet all but imperceptibly faster than the tide. It headed for the point where the anchor chain of the schooner angled sharply from the water. It had, in its center, a bulge where Bellow Bill's forehead and nose floated above the surface, plastered thickly with seaweed.

At dawn keen eyes would notice that bulge, and the gleam of wet

white skin beneath the brown-green weed. But dawn was fourteen minutes off, and the distance from shore to schooner was only a little more than two hundred yards. Save for the unavoidable guess at the exact moment of sunrise, Bellow Bill's attack was timed to the second and judged to the foot.

Halfway around the lagoon, under a thick bush, Oreen was crouching. A pearl that was not a pearl, but Death, bulged her cheek. Her glance shifted between the second hand of a wrist watch and the patches of weed that drifted toward the harbor entrance with the tide. Less than twenty feet in front of her, at high-tide mark on the beach, lay two of the tiny dug-outs that children use in the South Seas—the frailest apologies for boats. At her elbow Evishi was working frantically with a wet cloth to bring Owsley back to consciousness.

Courage and cowardice, split seconds and luck must join hands in Bill's attack.

"He groaned then," Evishi whispered. "He moved a little . . ."

"Then carry him out, as Bill told you," Oreen ordered tensely. "Don't let them see you, and don't forget his gun . . ."

"But I do not see the big tattooed man," quavered the house-boy.

"You fool, he said that he hoped we wouldn't!" Oreen snap-

ped. "We've only a minute or two more . . . Go!"

The houseboy clasped Owsley's limp arms around his neck and crawled across the beach, dragging the half-conscious trader. Evishi's teeth were chattering with fright. He could see the savages whose faces were painted with green fire so clearly that he forgot it was the water of the lagoon that collected the light, that to them the beach was a gray black stripe beneath dead-black foliage. With a desperate effort he pushed the light dugout before him and dragged the heavy trader after him. Only ten feet to go, down grade, over sand packed by the tide.

OWSLEY GROANED and stirred as the dugout slid into the water. Panting, Evishi dragged him over the gunwale, which was only inches high, made sure that the gun, fully loaded now, was in his pocket—and gave the dugout with its semiconscious passenger a mighty push out into the lagoon!

Instantly there was a savage shout both from the fire and the schooner. Arano's deep-toned voice brayed orders to launch a big dugout—to spread out along the beach to prevent a landing. But Evishi lay flat on the sand at the water's edge. Unseen, he crept backward. Panting, trembling, he huddled against Oreen.

"Well done!" she whispered,

never looking at him, but at the second hand of her watch. "Now hide, lad. God be with you!" She pushed a .32 into his hands. His teeth chattered as he squirmed away.

Out on the lagoon a big patch of seaweed warped itself around the schooner's anchor chain. The bulge in the center rested against the chain itself, and remained there. Near the fire a big dugout was being launched with savage yells—and suddenly, from the tiny, drifting dugout came a scream of terror that rose to falsetto and broke as Owsley's breath failed.

Oreen pitied him. His silence had sent better men than he to their death. Her brother had been one—and yet she shuddered to think of what the return of Owsley's senses must have been like. He must have thought it a hallucination from the dugout's bottom. The fire—the dancing shadows, the heads of green flame along the schooner's rail, the bigger boat, shoving toward him with a yelling crew. He had screamed with realization that the scene was real.

Then he fled. He had a gun. It was a paddle he caught up. He might have shot his way past the dugout and made the open sea. But he whirled his little craft, anxious only to keep the greatest possible distance between himself

and the boat that dashed for him, black against the firelight. Whirled toward the far side of the lagoon and paddled with the crazed strength of terror.

Instantly Oreen rose, walked across the beach, and launched the second dugout. She paddled straight for the schooner and the harbor entrance, which was a course at right angles to Owsley's line of flight. She was seen. Her heart hammered too hard to distinguish the orders Arano was braying. They didn't matter. She heard a deep voice that dominated and directed the howling savages, but the memory of other orders in the rumbling whisper of Bellow Bill filled her consciousness.

" . . . drive straight for the schooner . . . don't let yourself be caught too easily . . . shoot at them, but don't hit anyone. Arano'll order them not to kill you when he sees you are alone. And they won't, unless you madden them by drawing blood . . . "

Wouldn't they? She knelt, plying the paddle, the .32 lying ready in the bottom of the dugout. The first crew, after hesitating, had gone on after Owsley, lashed by Arano's roars. Another dugout was shoving off by the fire. But—the shaven-headed devil thought of everything—it turned away from her, blocking escape from the lagoon. It was with the cooler, more trustworthy men who were

with him on the schooner that Arano was going to capture her. They were swinging out a dinghy.

They would intercept her if she drove straight on. They couldn't hurt her—not with what she had in her cheek—but within another minute she'd be dead. A longer life—a little longer—if she whirled her frail craft and paddled back as she had come.

She gritted her teeth, and drove straight ahead. In the mass of seaweed by the anchor chain the bulge had disappeared. She didn't see that. She'd never even seen Bill, save for an instant. Thick, curly reddish hair, a square jaw; blue eyes . . .

"Drive on!" he'd said.

TWO OARSMEN whose faces flamed rowed the dinghy at her. She caught up the .32 and emptied it high in the air. She heard their savage, mocking yells. She wanted to scream that she'd have killed them both if Bellow Bill had not ordered her not to.

Then the prow of the dinghy struck and smashed her frail craft. She was flung in the water. A hand reached down and twisted brutally in her hair. She was dragged to the surface and held there, her outstretching chin against the dinghy's stern. A face of green fire bent down and leered at her. "Good!" growled Arano. "Bring her to the schooner, and

then go help them catch that other lool. I told you—they had no chance to escape at all."

He laughed. The sky had suddenly turned to gray, and as Oreen rolled her eyes to see the schooner she realized with despair that even now Arano had not blundered. Even now he had not stripped himself of guards. Behind his shaven head were the gleaming faces of two other savages. For an instant she believed they were his brothers. But they were dead. Like her brother. Like herself, in another minute . . .

Bellow Bill Williams pulled himself hand-over-hand down the anchor chain to the anchor itself. He had waited only until the dinghy was launched without stopping Oreen's progress. By their voices he had counted the number of the savages on the schooner; he had never really hoped that Arano would send all his men away. The big savage was a flawless tactician. Too flawless, since his orders became predictable.

A fierce pleasure in Oreen's nerve warmed Bill's heart. She and Evishi had carried out their assignments. It was his turn now. He stripped off his belt. With its steel tongue he unscrewed the shackle that held the anchor chain to the anchor. Six or eight turns only—thirty seconds' work. Oreen, thank God, had driven her dugout almost to the schooner's side. They

were carrying her aboard, now. Arano would order her carried below—and then like a flawless tactician, he would order his men on deck again to guide the chase after Owsley and keep watch for Evishi and Bill.

The chain jerked clear of the anchor as the shackle dropped and the tide caught the schooner. Bill was holding it with one hand. He was borne along. He worked himself upward while he waited to see which way the schooner would swing. For a boat set adrift in a tide swings broadside to the current. She fell off to starboard—and to the right, therefore, Bill swam for the surface like a shark that rushes from the depths to snatch its prize.

To Oreen, struggling feebly in the grip of the three who were carrying her down the companionway—to the savages in the dinghy and to those others in the dugout, who were yelling in triumph as a well-flung spear struck Owsley's back and skewered him like a beetle—what happened next seemed magic.

It was nothing of the sort. Only a superb swimmer like Bellow Bill, only a man of vast strength and a seaman whose experience amounted to intuition could have performed the feat, yet it was the result of skill.

AS THE SCHOONER turned

broadside to the tide the main boom swung out over the water, and the slackened main sheet became tight. A huge tattooed hand shot out of the water and gripped the main sheet below the block. With one arm Bellow Bill chinned himself. His tattooed body, clear to see in the dawn, seemed to be flung by invisible hands from the lagoon to cling like some huge gorilla to the boom. A mighty pull at the sheet with his free hand started the boom swinging in-board bearing him with it.

Over the water, over the rail, over the deck of the schooner he swung. The breeze was light. Its pressure against the sail could slow that movement, but not stop it against the mighty pull of Bill's arm. His belt, looped on a forefinger, dangled like a snake. Ponderously he swung toward three men, wedged in a narrow companionway. They dropped Oreen. They snatched at the weapons in their belts, but the swinging boom carried Bellow Bill directly over their heads.

"Ahoy!" he roared exultantly, and flung himself down the companionway upon them.

Two hundred and forty pounds, falling a good five feet. Bill's weight knocked them down. In a tangled mass they rolled down the companionway, to tumble in a heap on the deck below. With arms and legs spread wide Bill hugged

the three men to his chest. With a jerk of his wrist he wrapped the belt around his left fist. A knife, half drawn, was cutting into his thigh. Arano's head was under Bill's left arm. The savage burrowed to bite at the soft flesh of Bill's belly.

Bill's left fist smashed on the back of the shaven skull. The blow did not travel six inches, but the bone crushed beneath it, and on the shaven skin remained the deep imprint of a square belt-link, as though Bill had struck putty. The next blow snapped the back of the savage straining to draw the knife. Bill rolled clear. The third savage leaped up—and the flying belt caught him across the forehead. The gleaming paint was wiped off in a black, square-edge streak. The forehead, when Bill leaned down grimly to touch it with a forefinger, was sore.

"It's the weight of the gold studs that does it," Bill rumbled. "It's better than a chain."

He stood with the belt dangling from his left hand, listening, staring down at three dead faces painted with flame. The savages in the boats must be still wondering what had happened. They hadn't even yelled yet. The actual battle had not taken twenty seconds.

Oreen, over whom the fight had rolled, lay on her back at the foot of the companionway, unconscious. Her lips were parted.

Bellow Bill shuddered, and a perspiration which the fight had been unable to cause broke out on his forehead. Very delicately he felt inside the girl's mouth with a huge forefinger, and pulled out the tiny globule that looked like a pearl, and was Death.

"God, if you'd lost your nerve and put that between your teeth too soon! But you're thoroughbred," he muttered. He snapped the pellet up the companionway, and overboard, and lifted the girl onto his bunk. Her heart was beating strongly. She would come around all right.

Outside some savage uttered the first shout—of doubt, and alarm.

Bill crossed to a porthole. "Got Owsley, didn't you, you devils?" he rumbled. "Well, that saves the hangman at Thursday Island a job . . . And you saw me swing aboard and now you don't like it. Heading for the fire, eh? Waiting for orders from Arano—the chief that's never wrong, huh? Well—you'll get them!"

Very careful not to expose himself, Bellow Bill crawled up the

companionway and back again, dragging a bight of the main sheet. Into the loop of the rope he tied Arano and the two savages, on whose faces the flaming paint still burned. For a moment he stood scowling, dissatisfied.

Then his face cleared. From a locker he took a can of red hull paint, dipped in his hand, and pressed his huge palm and five spreading fingers across each face. Then he hauled on the main sheet. One by one the three bodies were dragged up the companionway stairs and out to the end of the boom. Once again the boom swung, bearing with it three bodies whose bestial, flaming faces were all but obliterated by the red paint of a white man's hand.

From around the schooner arose a cry of abject terror and surrender. The sound brought Oreen back to consciousness. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Bill! Bill!" she cried out in desperate appeal.

"I'm here," he rumbled. "It's all right, Oreen. Rest easy, gal. The fire on Runaloro is put out."

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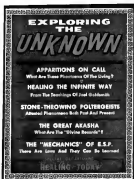
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